Colouring outside the lines: Re-exploring the teacher's role in visual arts learning in early childhood

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Abstract

Teachers can be powerful influences on how young children experience the visual arts. It is often teachers who make choices about when, where and how children will experience the visual arts in early childhood education. This paper explores an interpretivist, qualitative research project that examined the visual arts experiences of young children (aged 3-4) at three early childhood settings in Auckland, New Zealand. This paper explores a portion of the findings, focusing on the experiences and visual arts pedagogies of the early childhood teachers who participated in this study. In response to the literature, which suggests that many early childhood teachers continue to experience uncertainty around their roles as teachers of the arts, settings where the visual arts were deeply valued within the curriculum, were purposively selected. The rationale for selecting settings that valued this domain was to determine what factors and choices had enabled these settings to develop a rich visual arts curriculum for children. The study aimed to discover what influences had shaped teacher's visual arts pedagogies, and how this impacted young children's learning through the visual arts. The research found that when teachers nurture their visual arts knowledge and confidence, both personally and professionally, they are equipped to engage authentically with children's visual arts making and they make intentional and creative choices about visual arts curriculum and pedagogy.

Key words: Visual arts pedagogy, early childhood education, co-construction, co-artists

Introduction

The visual arts can support young children to explore, theorise, communicate, and reflect on their experiences of the world (Brooks, 2017; de Lautour, 2020; Richards & Terreni, 2023). Formative experiences in the visual arts contribute to how children develop their identities as learners and art-makers. Early childhood teachers play an important role in initiating children to the visual arts and in ensuring they develop a positive image of themselves as art-makers and creative thinkers (Denee et al., 2023). What is appropriate when developing and enacting visual arts curriculum, however, remains an area of confusion for some teachers (Denee, 2022; Lindsay 2017; 2021). Whilst some teachers feel hesitant about the idea of 'intervening' others may control the process to the point where each child's artwork appears identical (Lindsay, 2017). There are also teachers, informed by sociocultural theories and the associated pedagogies, who have found a place in between these positions. These teachers actively plan for and engage in children's art making, but also recognise the importance of ensuring children's ideas and interpretations remain at the forefront. Developing such practices, however, is not always straightforward, particularly if teachers have had little prior experience in the visual arts or recall negative visual arts encounters from their own educational histories (Denee et al., 2023; Lindsay, 2017).

This paper presents findings from a PhD study which explored factors shaping how young children value and use the visual arts in their learning. The interpretive qualitative research examined the influences on children's engagement with visual arts in early childhood settings and homes. It sought perspectives from teachers, families, and children, focusing on teachers' stories to understand their visual arts philosophies and practices and their impact on young children. This paper focuses on the findings derived from the participating teacher's stories. It scrutinises the ideas and events that

shaped their visual arts philosophies and practice, and examines how their pedagogical approaches impacted their work with young children.

Why is there so much confusion surrounding the visual arts in early childhood education?

A complex tangle of ideas influence how visual arts in early childhood education are valued and taught, including myths, policies, teachers' personal experiences, and research (Kindler, 1996). A myth is a societal belief so ingrained it is considered true (Foucault, 2003). Researchers like Eisner (1973) and McClure (2011) identified myths about children's visual art, such as the belief that all children are innately creative and are 'born artists'. This myth, perpetuated by modernist and postmodern art movements, led to a misreading of art as unteachable (McArdle, 2008). More recently, Lindsay (2018) that such myths continue to influence many teachers' practices resulting in them taking on a role as 'onlooker'. These ideas contradict the sociocultural and social constructivist theories underpinning New Zealand's early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017), which asserts that learning occurs through rich, reciprocal relationships between children and teachers, materials and places.

Teachers' personal self-efficacy in the visual arts significantly impacts their capacity to support learning in this domain (Denee et al., 2023). Self-efficacy is influenced by impactful events throughout a lifetime. For example, teachers may recall memories of their schooling where they received negative feedback about their artwork which may lead to a belief that they are 'not artistic' and, as a consequence, they may avoid the visual arts and further learning opportunities (Bandura, 2012; Pillen et al., 2013). A further factor impacting self-efficacy is that the arts remain marginalised within many schools as numeracy and literacy achievement continues to dominate the agendas of mainstream education. Bell (2010) argues that although New Zealand has a history of valuing the visual arts at all levels of education, policy decisions such as making visual arts a non-compulsory subject at years 9 and 10 have led to an overall devaluing of this domain.

A lack of self-efficacy in the visual arts becomes problematic, when these students become early childhood teachers. While pre-service education can boost confidence through self-reflection, the development of theoretical and pedagogical knowledge, and building visual arts skills (Author, 2023; McArdle, 2008), it is only effective if sufficient emphasis is placed on visual arts in programme design (Bell, 2010; Denee, 2022; Garvis et al., 2011; Lindsay, 2017). A lack of visual arts knowledge can lead to teachers relying on memories of their own childhood experiences or avoiding the arts altogether (Barton et al., 2013; Lindsay, 2017; Richards & Terreni, 2023).

Te Whāriki (MoE, 2017) acknowledges that young children construct knowledge through social interactions and that visual arts engagement can support both knowledge construction and relationships (Richards & Terreni, 2023). However, De Lautour (2020) argues that the curriculum assumes teachers' capacity to implement this. Although *Te Whāriki* Online (MoE, 2024) provides guidance on curriculum planning with the arts, there is still little information provided about how teachers could engage in such experiences (Richards & Terreni, 2023).

Beyond pedagogical beliefs and teachers' self-efficacy, broader challenges in the early childhood sector, impacted by decisions such as the 2010 policy to forgo the goal of 100% qualified teachers by 2012, have significantly impacted the sector throughout the past decade (Everiss et al., 2017). These decisions have led to some settings experiencing inadequate teacher/child ratios, a lack of qualified teachers, funding issues, and limited access to professional development (Office of Early Childhood

Education, 2023). These factors limit opportunities for professional growth and time for teachers to engage meaningfully with children through the visual arts.

Introducing the research

This research took place in three early childhood settings in Auckland, New Zealand that placed deep value on the visual arts. The study was informed by sociocultural and bioecological theories which recognise that children construct and co-construct knowledge through a complex series of social interactions that take place in their homes, communities and early childhood settings. These theories are of particular significance in New Zealand due to their influence on *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) which recognises children are embedded in their social, cultural and historical contexts and, as such, are recognised for the knowledge and skills they have developed through their lived experiences prior to entering an early childhood setting. Theories pertaining to how identity is formed in the early years and those that explore how personal identity impacts pedagogy also informed the study design. Veale (2000) claims that early years are crucial for forming personal artistry and beliefs about art and are often by key adults in their lives. These interactions, termed proximal processes by Bronfenbrenner, align with Vygotsky's theory of perezhivanie, or 'lived emotional experience' (Connery et al., 2010). Veresov and Fleer (2016) describe perezhivanie as a prism through which the social environment is refracted back onto the child. These ideas led me to explore the interplay between personal artistic identity, teacher identity and its impact on visual arts pedagogy.

The study was situated in a qualitative interpretivist paradigm which focuses on the study of lived experience (Fitzpatrick & Mullen, 2019). I drew upon narrative inquiry which allowed me as the researcher to immerse myself in the stories of the three participating settings. To seek multiple perspectives, I collected stories from the participating teachers, children and families at each setting. In terms of the teachers, I was interested in learning what experiences had shaped their relationship with the visual arts, what theories and ideas had informed their pedagogical approaches, and to observe how this impacted young children's visual arts learning. To collect the teachers' stories, data collection included a conversation with each teaching team, classroom observations and teachers were given a reflective art journal where they could record their ideas through text or images.

The data, rich in images and stories, initially drove the analysis. As key ideas emerged, re-storying through interim research texts, both textual and visual, were examined through reflective and theoretical lenses aligned with the theoretical framework. This process of re-telling my participants' narratives helped me uncover complex meanings within their experiences, revealing the intricate relationships between people, environments, culture, education, language, and families (Creswell, 2019). Drawing on Souto-Manning's (2014) assertion that personal narrative is embedded in the social world and institutions, I focused on the connections between systems to identify macro-level influences in micro-level narratives, for example, recognising the impact of policy on how education is experienced by individuals.

Ethical permission was approved by the supporting University. To ensure anonymity, each setting, teacher and child was assigned a pseudonym and participating teachers chose their own. At each setting, one to three children and their families were purposively selected as key participants and agreed to be identified by their first names. As the sole researcher, I worked with all my participants to ensure they were comfortable with my analysis and stories I had re-told in the reporting of the research (Prosser & Burke, 2008).

Introducing the participating ECE settings

'Amanta' is a public kindergarten in North Auckland in a mid to high socio-economic area. Five teachers, referred to as Fleur, Margaret, Samantha, Maddie, and Sally chose to participate. 'Awhero' is a community-based setting in a low socio-economic area in South Auckland. Two teachers, known as Susan and Hannah, participated. 'Alfredo' is a privately-owned early childhood centre in central Auckland. The centre's atelierista, Andrea, and three teachers, Sabrina, Katy, and Ella, chose to participate.

Findings: The teachers stories

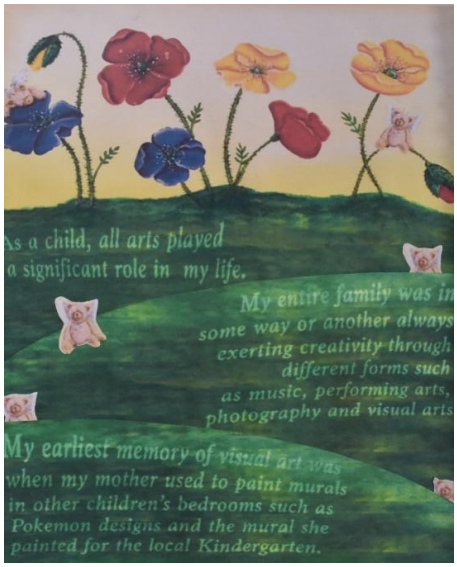

Figure 1: Collage by Maddie

Early life role models in the arts significantly impact artistic identity.

Several of the participating teachers shared narratives about their creative mothers, significant art works in their homes, galleries they visited, and materials they had explored and played with as children. For example, Fleur, the head teacher at Amanta wrote about her mother's immigration to New Zealand in her journal:

"She brought with her a love of classical paintings, Shakespeare and classical music. I guess this love enabled me to be exposed to the things that she loved, and I developed an appreciation for such things".

Another example is Maddie, who created a collage exploring her earliest visual arts memory of her creative mother painting murals in other children's bedrooms and for the local kindergarten (Figure 1). Similarly, Margaret wrote:

> I have some vivid memories of spending sunny afternoons immersed in coloured pencils and scrapbooks. If I was to put my finger on it, I would have to say my love for the visual arts came from my mother. My mum loved to paint and draw and as a child I was in awe of her talent.

These stories highlight the significance of adults' role-modelling enjoyment of the arts and how very young children are particularly receptive as they engage in these first artistic encounters (Veale, 2000).

Impact of own educational experiences

Several teacher participants shared negative experiences within their secondary schooling. For example, Fleur, when enquiring about enrolling in art in secondary school was told to choose a subject she would have a chance of succeeding in, and Margaret wrote about being forced to paint in a particular style, an experience that resulted in her not painting again for ten years. She wrote:

> For me, it was more about being made to create art that I never wanted to do in the first place. I felt like I'd been squashed into a box and that my freedom had been taken away.

Maddie wrote about an experience of moving schools mid-year and being informed her partially completed visual arts portfolio was unsuitable. She wrote, "I had got it all wrong and I found that really puzzling because I didn't know there was a wrong way of doing art."

These narratives demonstrate how differing approaches to teaching visual arts can impact children's developing artistic identities. In early childhood, children's creativity and free exploration is often

celebrated. Yet, as children transition into primary school and beyond, they can experience contrastingly different educational environments where the subject matter, materials and even techniques are tightly controlled.

Participant teachers, Ella and Sabrina had both initially trained as primary school teachers. They both noted a lack of emphasis placed on the visual arts within their initial teacher education (ITE) programmes. Ella was left with the impression that "if there was anything that we didn't have time for, because the focus was science, literacy and numeracy, then art was the first to go". These narratives correspond with Bell's (2010) argument that the visual arts are often viewed as less valuable than other curriculum domains within the wider education sector, perpetuated by broader policy decisions. Similarly, McArdle (2012) argues "ambiguities and contradictions inherent in art education have a long and enduring history, and teachers and pre-service teachers themselves are products of these ambiguous and competing messages" (p. 2).

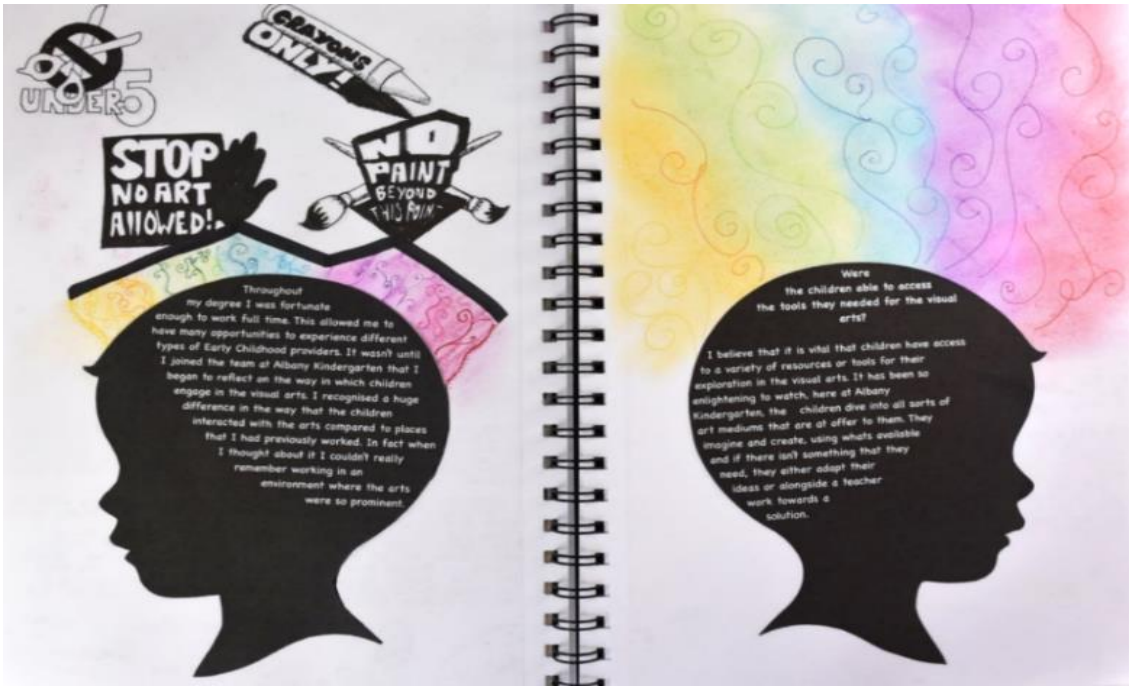

Figure 2: Collage by Maddie

The impact of centre philosophy

Experiences of working in settings where the arts were not as valued were also reflected in the teachers journals. Maddie recalled a setting where children were restricted as to when, where and how they could create visual arts. She created a collage that compared these experiences with her current setting where both teachers and children had agency in visual arts making (Figure 2). Similarly, Fleur recalled an event early in her career:

> There would be a certain time in the afternoon where you would have an art activity ready to go and you had to get through all 18 children. Boom boom, boom, one after the other, we would have the balloons out and you would say "next." … I remember thinking, did I really do three years for this? I didn't know what the answer was, but I knew it wasn't that. It feels a lot more comfortable now with what we are providing for children, and I know that will change again, it is never static.

Engaging in a personal arts practice enriches visual arts pedagogy

Figure 3: Visual art by Susan and Margaret

Despite challenges within their own educations, these same teachers eventually found ways to reframe their relationship with visual arts. This was fundamental to them reconceptualising their visual arts pedagogies. At all three settings there were teachers who engaged in visual arts for pleasure outside of their day-to-day teaching (Figure 3). Stories of artistic reawakening's were important stories in several journals. For Sally and Samantha, their experiences of ITE provided opportunities to learn about a range of artists, mediums, and techniques. For Margaret, it was the act of walking into her local art shop one day, which led her to rediscover her lost passion. For Fleur, it was discovering the joy of 'up-cycling'. For Susan, who is of Māori decent, it was learning how to weave as a way to connect with her culture.

In contrast, Sabrina, who expressed continued anxiety about visual arts making, shared a story of a recent processional development event facilitated by atelierista, Andrea, where she had been invited to paint the scent of cinnamon. This experience had challenged her belief that visual art has to represent something accurately and she was learning new ways to think about art and her own capacity to be creative.

Engaging with the pedagogical ideas of Reggio Emilia, where the arts are valued as integral to supporting children's knowledge construction processes, was referred to by Samantha, Margaret, Fleur, and all of the teachers at Alfredo. For example, Margaret wrote:

> I was captivated by the genuine respect for children's work, and the idea of using 'provocations' to stimulate thinking, creativity, exploration, and problem solving. I loved the idea that children were exposed to a possibility but not directed or specifically told how to do it, they direct their own learning, set their own goals and make their own discoveries.

Exploring these ideas had challenged their thinking and had deepened their understanding of children's capabilities, the potential of visual arts as a mediator of learning, and their roles as teachers of visual arts. The teacher's journals, and our collaborative conversations revealed their deeply reflective attitudes and openness to new ideas. Importantly, a commitment to individual and collaborative reflection, and time to consider how the visual arts could be positioned within each learning environment was a key factor in determining the central role the visual arts played in each setting.

Stories of practice

Amanta kindergarten

The centre philosophy at Amanta refers to an image of children as independent, self-directed learners, bringing rich funds of knowledge to their learning. The teachers expressed their commitment to supporting children to be investigative problem-solvers who become life-long learners. They believe that the physical environment transmits powerful messages about how childhood and learning is valued. As a result, walking into the kindergarten is like entering a giant art studio. The teaching team are deeply connected by their shared love of visual arts. Fleur explained:

> There is an understanding here that your learning journey isn't your own journey, it's a collaborative journey … there's that sense of feeding off each other and drawing on each other's strengths.

The teachers decided to weave their artistic and teaching identities together in forming their pedagogical approach. In practice, this occurred in several ways. First, teachers initiated their own creative projects and discussed their processes with children to promote the value of creativity and role-model dispositions such as collaboration, problem solving, perseverance, and seeking support. For example, Maddie worked to create a world map to act as an identity board (Figure 4). Closely watched by twins, Ellie and Sydney, Maddie threaded wool around each nail. In response, the children wound wool around animals they had collected, re-interpreting her strategy.

Figure 4: Ellie and Sydney wind wool

Second, teachers initiate collaborative projects which they invite children to participate in. An example was a large collaborative multi-media canvas which focused on the Māori creation story of Ranginui and Papatūānuku (Figure 5).

Figure 5: A collaborative canvas

Samantha talked to the children about what had already been included and what could be added:

***Samantha**: So, we have the stars and the sun and a rainbow, what else do you think we might need for Ranginui?*
***May (4 years old)**: A pineapple.*
***Samantha**: Hmmm, Papatūānuku looks really full.*
May finds a solution.
***May**: It's a flying pineapple!*

This experience encouraged May, and the group, to share ideas and develop creative solutions. Fleur reiterated the social value of such projects, explaining "This is probably the most important thing that I see when children engage in art – the rich dialogue that occurs, particularly when a teacher or adult co-exists as part of the experience".

Third, the teachers intentionally create their own work with children, sometimes contributing to shared works. Margaret explained:

> I believe when I work with children in this way it opens up opportunities for discussion and further exploration about techniques and intentions. I find myself acting as a resource, answering questions, suggesting alternative approaches, and provoking deeper thinking about their art.

For example, Kadija had recently immigrated to New Zealand, and was settling into kindergarten. One morning she joined Fleur at the light table where she silently painted a face. Fleur responded by painting her own version, guided by Kadija's actions and gestures. She encouraged Kadija, affirming, "you've given me ideas".

Awhero

The majority of children attending Awhero are of Māori descent although a few are of Pasifika[1] heritage. The architecture of this setting is significant. On entering Awhero one is greeted by a light filled gallery space filled with indigenous art. The learning space is made up of two main areas, a large art studio named te ao toi (the world of art) and a larger room with a communal area for hui (meetings). These spaces reflect the vibrancy of Māori tikanga (customs and protocols) as well as influences from Reggio Emilia. The physical environment is the first way that the philosophy of aroha (care) is communicated, indicating that the space was designed for a very specific image of childhood, a child who is embedded within their culture, who has a right to beauty, and makes meaning through the visual arts.

I discovered that this learning community gravitated to te ao toi each morning. Children represented taonga (treasure) discovered in the garden, their relationships, each other, and their experiences outside of Awhero. Woven throughout these occurrences were opportunities to shape and affirm cultural identity and develop cultural understanding (Figure 6). The value of ako meaning "both to learn and to teach" (Tamati, 2005, p. 23) extended beyond the connections between teachers and children to the teaching team itself. In her role as kaiwhakaatu (guide), Susan guided both children and teachers to use the visual arts to connect with culture and develop a sense of identity as Māori, as well as support the cultural identities of non-Māori children.

[1] The term 'Pasifika' is used to describe migrants from the Pacific region and their descendants who now call New Zealand home.

Figure 6: Visual arts at Awhero

For example, four-year-old Rose, of Tongan and Samoan heritage, became fascinated by wharenui (a Māori meeting house). Susan supported Rose's interest over several weeks, observing, listening, and encouraging her to represent her ideas, work with children who had personal experience of their own wharenui, and to visit a local marae, an experience all of the children relished. With the sensitive support of her teachers and peers, Rose's knowledge of wharenui flourished (Figure 7).

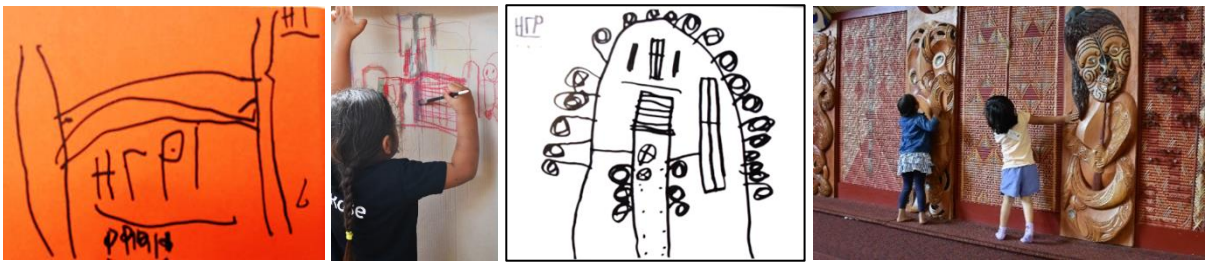

Figure 7: Rose's developing knowledge of wharenui

Alfredo

The philosophy at Alfredo is inspired by aspects of the Reggio Emilia approach. A pedagogical team made up of a small group of experienced early childhood teachers supports teaching teams and the setting employs a full time atelierista, Andrea. The preschool room, where the research took place, is bathed in natural light, filled with provocations inviting children to create. The visual arts are valued as a tool for children to mediate their thinking both individually and collaboratively as they explore working theories. During an investigative period each morning, children worked together with their peers and teachers on inquiry-based projects. These inquiries connect to a broader pedagogical question which the whole centre investigates. At the time of the research, it was 'how can we nurture our ecological future?' The investigative period each day is particularly significant for fostering a culture of artmaking in the classroom. During this period, the teachers guide children to develop processes for thinking, skills and techniques for working with art media and create opportunities for them to discuss ideas. For example, a small group were currently investigating and representing monarch butterflies using a magnifying camera (Figure 8).

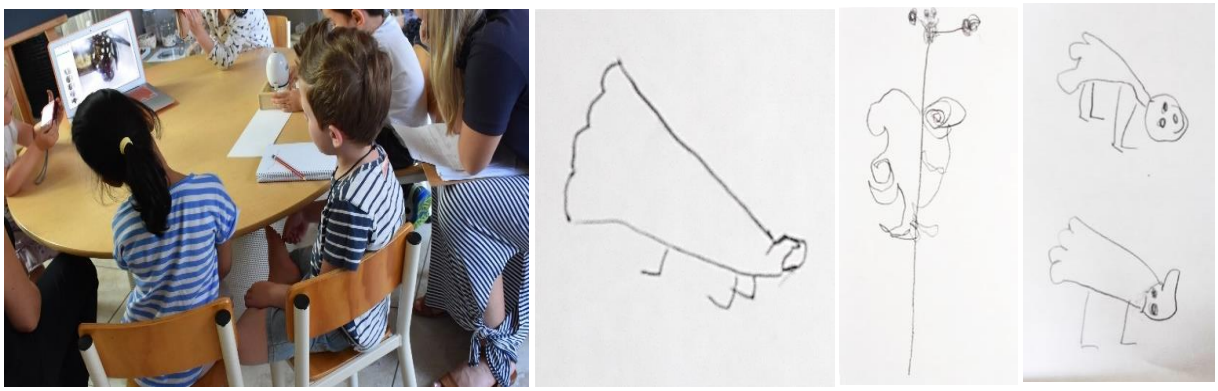

Figure 8: Exploring butterflies through drawing

As atelierista, Andrea plays a significant role in influencing how the teachers integrated the visual arts into curriculum. In her Master of Fine Arts she had explored interdisciplinarity, play, and multimedia installation and her rich understanding of what constitutes visual learning resulted in her disrupting more conventional interpretations of what visual arts are, for example, to represent something accurately. Her understanding of the multi-modal ways that children learn resulted in her thinking about technology, materials and spaces in innovative ways in order to support children's research. An example was the sound and water inquiry (Figure 9). The children, with Andrea's support created an atelier of sound to explore their current working theories. Andrea described how the children were hypothesising about the types of sounds the water would make with the addition of each new material. A video recorder and projector had been set up so that the children could record their work to add a rich visual dimension to their investigation.

Figure 9: Creating an atelier of sound

Discussion

Artistic identity evolves throughout a lifetime

The visual and textual narratives shared by the teachers reveal the profound impact of bi-directional interactions with key adults during their lifetimes in impacting how they came to value the visual arts and develop an identity as 'artistic' or 'not artistic'. Several teachers shared positive stories of artmaking during their early childhood where they experienced freedom to explore art materials and were exposed to role-models who demonstrated how the visual arts were a valued cultural tool within

their particular microsystems. However, some later experienced negative encounters with visual arts educators at secondary school, where visual art was no longer valued as exploratory and child-led, but rather, as a product that would be summatively assessed. The contrasting ways in which the visual arts are valued across educational sectors is concerning due to the impact this can have on children's evolving identities as art makers. Of further concern is the lack of emphasis on the visual arts in some of the pre-service education programmes. Congruent with the literature, marginal time spent learning about the visual arts within teacher education can adversely impact the capacity of teachers to plan and facilitate learning in this domain (Bell, 2010; Denee, 2022; Garvis et al., 2011; Lindsay, 2017).

Thankfully, these same teachers eventually found a way back to visual arts. While Bronfenbrenner (1994) argues that microlevel proximal processes, for example, visual art being valued at home, can diminish the effects of external environmental influences, he also suggests their potency depends on the "content and structure of the microsystem" (p. 39). Congruent with Veale's (2000) research, it appears that the potency of these early experiences, and the enculturation into the visual arts as a valued cultural tool in early childhood, resulted in the visual arts becoming deeply rooted within these teachers personal identities. This has implications for all early childhood teachers as it becomes clear that both families and teachers can play an important role in enculturating children to the visual arts in positive, affirming ways during early childhood.

Reconceptualising visual arts identity and pedagogy

Whilst all the teachers recognised the visual arts are a key domain to support children's learning, their stories of reaching this position were unique. For some, the visual arts played a central role in their personal lives which, as a result, had fuelled their curiosity about how this domain could support young children's learning. For others, reflection about some of the more negative experiences of the visual arts within their educational experiences had enabled them to reframe these narratives, establishing a clear vision of their roles as teachers (Author, 2023). For Sabrina and Ella, limited emphasis on the visual arts during pre-service training had initially resulted in them lacking confidence to enact visual arts curriculum (Lindsay, 2017), however, for these teachers the impact of leadership, professional development, and continuous pedagogical support within their ECE setting significantly impacted their pedagogical understanding and confidence. Their stories highlight the impact of sustained, collaborative professional learning as a strategy to deepen understanding of the visual arts and their roles as teachers (Denee, 2022).

The establishment of key values and a unique shared philosophy of the visual arts

Each setting had spent considerable time developing a shared philosophy of how the visual arts support children's learning. Exploration of the pedagogical ideas of Reggio Emilia, and the resultant individual and collaborative reflection these ideas provoked, acted as potent means "for challenging the taken for granted assumptions of the dominant narrative" (Dhalberg et al., p. viii), such as the notion that the teacher must take on an onlooker role. As a result of this work, each setting had established unique images of childhood, interpretations of how the visual arts supported children's learning, and their roles as teachers. These choices impacted the children's learning in differing ways. At Amanta, the teachers projected an image of the child as 'partner' and 'co-artist' in an environment filled with provocations and responsive materials, resulting in children independently initiating visual arts projects and relishing opportunities to contribute to shared projects. At Awhero, children were valued as taonga, embedded within their whakapapa and whānau, and the visual arts were valued for how they can "deepen understandings of the implicit beliefs held by Māori, particularly in relation to the natural world, but also in relation to Māori histories, values and their locations within the land in relation to one another" (Wrightson & Heta-Lensen, 2013, p. 18). Similar to Amanta, children in this

setting were drawn to opportunities to create collectively in an environment of connection and reciprocity. At Alfredo, both children and teachers were valued as theory makers and researchers and the children were enculturated in the value that the visual arts can be a language for meaning making, and to co-construction knowledge.

These findings illustrate a key tenet of *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017), that each setting weaves their own curriculum according to the values, priorities and aspirations of that place. These learning communities did not however, see their approaches as fixed, but instead took a position of 'not knowing' which Rinaldi and Moss (2004) describe as "a place where questions and uncertainty, change and innovations are welcome" (p. 2).

Teachers as co-participants and co-artists

It was particularly interesting that so many of the teachers in this study nurtured their own creativity outside of their teaching. They utilised this knowledge to talk authentically about skills, techniques, and ideas with children. In some cases, they took on roles as co-artists, actively sharing, creating, and collaborating through the visual arts with children. This is a significant pedagogical shift in the wider landscape of visual arts practices in early childhood education where the dominant discourse that the teacher must not overly intervene in children's creative engagement continues to prevail (Richards & Terreni, 2023; Linsday, 2018). Engagement in sustained, collaborative discussion amongst the leaders and teaching teams, where ideas about childhood and teaching and learning were interrogated through the lens of sociocultural theories and associated pedagogies, such as Reggio Emilia, were crucial in helping these teachers make the decision to intentionally become more active in children's artmaking. This aligns with Clark and de Lautour's (2009) argument that the "view of the teacher as hands-off/onlooker does not honour the relationship between teacher and child, nor fully allow for rich, meaningful collaborative experiences with each other through the visual arts" (p. 116). These authors assert that "the agentic teacher, fully present in their beliefs and values about the arts, does. (ibid).

Implications for teachers

Whilst these stories uncover key factors that support the development of rich visual arts pedagogies, informed by sociocultural theories, they raise the question of what happens when early childhood settings or individual teachers have no access to expertise in the visual arts.

An ECE community, or teaching team wanting to interrogate how the visual arts are valued and enacted in their setting, could begin by exploring key evaluative questions about the nature of childhood and how children learn, and how the visual arts can support this, is a valuable first step. Early childhood settings could form a professional learning community (PLC) with other settings in their area and invite artists from their community to come and share their knowledge through practical workshops. Sustaining learning in settings such as a PLC can be particularly effective as they allow for "for multiple cycles of learning, practice and reflection" (Denee et al., 2023, p. 7). Traditionally, artist/teachers in early childhood settings have been qualified artists, however, the inclusion of a specialist art teacher may be financially challenging for most settings. There is, however, scope for reconceptualising this role and instead nurturing the capacity of ECE teachers who do love the visual arts to become leaders and mentors in this domain.

The commonality in the stories gathered in this research is a commitment to advocating for the value of the visual arts in children's learning and lives. Whilst these ideas offer suggestions for how individual teachers or ECE settings might reconceptualise their visual arts practices, there remain challenges in how the visual arts are valued across the different settings within children's microsystems and at a

macro policy level. Further research that makes visible the important role the visual arts play in children's lives and learning and offers alternate images of the role of the visual arts teacher, will contribute to this ongoing conversation.

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