
The historical, philosophical and theoretical influences on early childhood visual arts education in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Jannie Visser

Abstract:

This paper discusses the historical and contemporary influences and theoretical perspectives on early childhood visual arts education in Aotearoa New Zealand. The author contends that the overriding paradigm for visual art education in this sector is based on developmental, progressive and psycho-analytical theories and philosophies with their inherent dichotomies of process versus product, academic versus non-academic, integration versus segregation of the arts, free play versus adult-direction, and play versus work. Following from this discussion it is suggested that these dichotomies call for strong debates on the value of early childhood art and art education with the ultimate aim an early childhood art education model in Aotearoa New Zealand based on a solid epistemological rationale.

The early childhood education sector is noted for its variety of structural, curricular, pedagogical and evaluative approaches depending on type of centre, theoretical underpinnings, and the individual and collective philosophies of the professionals. As May (1997) stated, "... the New Zealand response [to new methods and approaches] was a receptiveness to a broad range of perspectives, rather than the adoption of a particular brand" (p.108). She surmised that "isolating the New Zealand response to these ideas is not easy because ... there was no clear line of importation" (p.108). However, as Gardner (1990) stated "the values and priorities of a culture can be readily discerned in the way in which its classroom learning is organized" (p. ix). The early childhood education sector, as other sectors, is marked by shifts in theory and practice. There are distinct streams of influence on 'classroom learning' evident, shaped by diverse ideologies, perspectives and contexts (Eisner, 1972; Efland, 1990; Korzenic, 1990; Sullivan, 1993; Epstein, 2001; May, 2001). One could argue, therefore, that it is difficult but certainly not impossible to define the historical developments and theoretical perspectives that have impacted on early childhood visual arts education in Aotearoa New Zealand. In this paper these influences, past

and present, will be examined. I will argue that developmental, progressive education and psycho-analytical theories still dominate practices in early childhood art education, and contribute to the prevailing debate around a number of dichotomies, namely process versus product, academic versus non-academic, integration versus segregation of the arts, free play versus adult-direction, and play versus work (Wright, 1991; Ritchie, 1999; Gunn, 2000). As I consider these dichotomies to be interrelated in early childhood education, the validity and effectiveness of the different philosophies and approaches will be evaluated accordingly. I will contend that the on-going debate around these dichotomies in art education requires a clear understanding and defining of what constitutes and is worthwhile in art education in the early childhood sector (Smith, 1992; Siegesmund, 1998).

The Froebellian influence on art education

Although the 20th century was marked by an on-going interest in and focus on children's development in the visual arts (Gardner, 1990; Korzenic, 1990; Clark, 1996; David, 2001), the late 19th and early 20th century, nationally as well as internationally, was more concerned with the care and “‘rescue’ [of] poor children ... and improv[ing] the homes the children came from” (May, 1997, p.67). The early kindergartens were established as charitable rather than educational institutions (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2000). Although the kindergarten concept came to New Zealand via Britain and the United States, programmes were strongly influenced by the German educationist Froebel. His pedagogy acknowledged childhood as a unique stage in life, and encouraged children to be creative and expressive through self-directed play (Sienkiewicz, 1985; May, 1997; Ritchie, 1999; Roopnarine & Johnson, 2000). The Froebellian notions of childhood and free play seemed on the surface to differ quite strongly from the art education model of the time, concerned mainly with developing students' physical skills useful in industry (Eisner & Ecker, 1970; Betenas, 1985; Chalmers, 1990; Gardner, 1990). Yet, the carefully timetabled activities around Froebel's 'gifts' and 'occupations' (such as weaving, clay moulding, drawing, paper folding, sewing and stick laying) *structured* play and the role of the teacher was that of the technician, whose duty it was to teach through sense-experiences “a series of concepts about geometrical solids, colour relationships and the nature and quality of the materials used” (Sienkiewicz, 1985, p.129).

Encouragement of the child's physical and perceptual skill development was also important (Read, 1961; Sienkiewicz, 1985; May, 1997; Roopnarine & Johnson, 2000). The Froebel kindergarten model was seen as the answer to the social and economic needs of the times. As the Cohen Report (1912) stated, 'the child who passes from the kindergarten into the infant classes of the State school is better prepared ... for the elementary manual training classes of the primary school' and as such the kindergarten formed 'the basis of true technical education' (cited in May, 1997, p.82). Research (Lewis, 1998/1999; Ritchie, 1999; Gunn, 2000) demonstrates an on-going adherence to the initial kindergarten model with the encouragement of free play within clearly defined core curriculum areas and carefully planned art activities as additional one-off experiences linked to specific developmental and learning objectives. It could be argued that the strong demarcation between work and play of the Froebellian model has contributed to current early childhood educators' view that children's involvement in the disciplines of literacy and numeracy is viewed as 'real learning' or 'work', while involvement in the disciplines of the creative arts is seen as 'play'. This perspective could be reinforced by current government initiatives that aim to address social and economic needs, such as its national literacy strategy. We need to be careful that the value and the role of the visual arts in education are not diminished by placing the scientific mode against the artistic mode (Eisner, 1972; Efland, 1990; Siegesmund, 1998).

Siegesmund (1998) argued that art has had recurring cycles of inclusion and exclusion dependent on its contribution to cognitive development and learning. His argument centred around Efland's (1990) three streams of influence: the expressionist (where art is seen as a vehicle to emotional expressiveness); the reconstructionist (art as an interdisciplinary tool of analysis); and the scientific rationalist stream (art as a distinct discipline with an empirical knowledge base) (cited in Siegesmund, 1998, pp.199-207). From the beginning of the 20th century all three streams became increasingly evident in early childhood art education, influenced by the new philosophical and theoretical perspectives of the Child Study Movement, Progressive Education and Psycho-analysis (Gardner, 1990; Korzenic, 1990; Clark, 1996; David, 2001).

The Progressive Education Movement

Both the expressionist and reconstructionist streams were evident in the Progressive Education Movement in the 1920s. Led by Dewey (Mayhew & Edwards, 1936 cited in Efland, 1990, p.121), art was seen as a tool to creative self-expression and cooperative problem-solving linked to the exploration of wider social issues within an integrated curriculum framework (Eisner & Ecker, 1970; May, 1997; David, 2001; Althouse, Johnson, & Mitchell, 2003). Dewey's theory has strongly influenced the early childhood education sector in Aotearoa New Zealand resulting in the visual arts as part of an integrated whole rather than *a discipline* (May, 1997; Ritchie, 1999; Gunn, 2000). This integration of art and other subject areas has certainly supported children's holistic development and learning within a meaningful socio-cultural context (Althouse et al., 2003). As Stuhr (1995) stated, "art taught in an interdisciplinary fashion is better able to reflect and create understanding about the social, cultural, and political conditions that it is part of" (cited in Siegesmund, 1998, p.204). Eisner (1972) and Siegesmund (1998) however outlined the possible disadvantages of an integrated arts curriculum model. By using art as a tool rather than a subject, art could lose its status as a 'legitimate' discipline compared to the disciplines of science, mathematics, literacy and technology. One could further argue that with current economic and education policies that focus increasingly on improving skills needed for an internationally competitive economy, it is important to ensure that the visual arts are viewed as a discreet discipline with its own distinct learning outcomes seen to contribute to children's knowledge, skills and attitudes.

The Child Study Movement

The Child Study Movement, instigated at the turn of the century by Stanley Hall (Betenas, 1985), and Spencer's Social Darwinism (Engel, 1995), reinforced Froebel's notion that children developed and learnt differently from adults. Focussing on the mental and physical development of the child attention was paid to the role of imagination, and children's drawings were analysed as to the 'how' and 'why' children drew (Chapman, 1978; Efland, 1990; Korzenic, 1990; Engel, 1995). The outcome was the categorization of art development in stages and the liberalization of art education (Eisner & Ecker, 1970). Researchers argued that the Child Study Movement's perspective on the sequential nature of development in art has resulted in

adults and curricula focussing on children's development in relation to realistic visual representation (Chapman, 1978; Gardner, 1990; Engel, 1995; Matthews, 1996). One could say that many educators in early childhood education art programmes still undervalue children's early achievements and define these in terms of deficits. It is important to stress that educators value young children's production of art *in its own right*, not as part of progression onto the next stage (Schirmacher, 1993). Early mark- and shape-making are explorations of concepts and ideas; they are representations of form and movement, and as such form part of a child's art learning. Educators need to know, understand and respect this. Arts education should be based on a sound understanding of children's development, their interest and capabilities.

Debates over how development in art unfolds

However, it is important that educators are aware that debates over *how* development in art unfolds have taken and still take place based on different philosophical and theoretical perspectives (Read, 1961; Kellog & O'Dell, 1967; Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1982; Betenas, 1985; Gardner, 1990; Engel, 1995).

For example, Kellog's (1967) research identified a number of predictable and sequential stages of development: scribbling, placement, shape, design, and pictorial. She considered this development to be universal for children across the world, as well as a replication of the artistic development of the human species (Read, 1961; Kellog & O'Dell, 1967; Shirmacher, 1993). Although the idea of child art universality has been challenged by postmodernists as "the internationalization of images derived from popular Western culture rather than from parallel modes of artistic development" (Clark, 1996, p.74), it was echoed by the ideas expounded by Read (1961). Read (1961) acknowledged "the commonality in art [as] evidence of common humanity" (Eisner, 1972, p.92). However, he challenged the 'neatness' of distinct evolutionary stages as universal norms, as he viewed art as a medium for *individual* communication and self-expression (Read, 1961). Rather, he emphasized the close relationship between children's personality and their art, and identified eight types: organic, emphatic, rhythmical pattern, structural form, enumerative, haptic, decorative, and imaginative. These categories he related to Jung's psychological types

of extrovert and introvert and Bullough's four types of aesthetic appreciation (Read, 1961). His theory of types includes a range of primordial symbols, such as lines, spirals, and other geometrical marks, including the mandala, the circle and the star (Eisner, 1972). Read viewed these symbols as "a social language of a rudimentary kind which may stand for some other mental element" (pp.130-131).

Eisner (1972) challenged Read's theory as standing "outside the realm of empirical validation" (p.92). This scientific-rationalist stance, however, assumes that only factors that can be observed are worthwhile, and ignores the biological, socio-cultural and ecological influences that may impact on a child's art development. From an expressionist, psycho-analytical and socio-cultural perspective his ideas make every sense. Although his ideas have not impacted as hugely on early childhood art education as Lowenfeld and Freud, with the increased interest in children's dispositional learning his theory may resurface as relevant.

Another theorist who validated child art in its own right was Lowenfeld (Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1982; Efland, 1990; Engel, 1995). His creativity-based theory of symbolic developmental stages in art stressed the need for children's creativity and sensory development to unfold naturally, unimpeded by external influences. Teachers should nurture children's artistic development and the production of visual forms by encouraging self-expression, *not* by teaching them how to make art (Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1982; Korzenic, 1990; Wright, 1991). This perspective reflected 'the 1940s notion of Freud's psycho-analytical theory of art as 'a mechanism for the non-destructive release needed for the healthy development of children' (Freedman, 1985, p.24). Both Lowenfeld and Freud impacted hugely on early childhood art education, where the process is still considered more important than the product and teachers take on a passive, hands-off role (Brownlee, 1983; Lewis, 1998/99; Ritchie, 1999; Gunn, 2000; Hancock, 2003).

Lowenfeld's theory has been challenged by a number of researchers (McFee, 1961; Eisner, 1972; Gardner, 1990; Clark, 1996; Siegesmund, 1998). McFee (1961), for example, argued that Lowenfeld "divides children according to assumed biogenic

tendencies” (p.164) and ignores the role experience and environment play in children’s learning and development.

Clark (1996) in contrast argued that Lowenfeldian curricula principles “have become virtually synonymous with instrumentalism in art education” (p.73). One could concur, like Smith (1992), that in one sense art education is always instrumental, whether curricular, pedagogical, social, political, cultural or economic, as it tries to “satisfy some individual interest or social need” (p.256).

Siegesmund (1998) challenged Lowenfeld’s expressionist view of art as a vehicle for self-expression and mental health, arguing that art should not lie “outside of cognitive concerns” as it will contribute to the view of art as non-academic, and as such lose its validity in education (p.201). Rather than creating a dualism between the academic and non-academic, one could concur with Gardner (1990) that the visual arts are an activity of the mind as well as a means to work through emotional issues, and to explore interpersonal relations and personal feelings.

Gardner’s views on children’s learning and development in art

Gardner’s (1990) views on children’s learning and development in art have been readily accepted by the early childhood sector, both nationally and internationally. His assertion that “artistic forms of knowledge and expression are less sequential, more holistic and organic, than other forms of knowing” reiterated existing holistic and ecological perspectives in the sector (Gardner, 1990, p.42). Furthermore, his perspective is a synthesis of three kinds of theory, which have influenced early childhood practices for some time: his theory of Multiple Intelligences, Piaget’s developmental theory of learning, and the work of philosophers of symbolic forms, such as Goodman (Engel, 1995, p.20). For example, Gardner’s insistence that adult intervention before school age was unnecessary is in line with the current art curriculum paradigm of many professionals, who believe that children move through discreet developmental stages, construct meaning and understanding in art through individual, self-directed discovery and exploration of the environment, using their senses, motor actions and increased mastery of symbolic tools and systems (Chapman,

1978; Gardner, 1990; Wright, 1991; Engel, 1995; Seefeldt, 1995; Goodman, 1978, cited in Siegesmund, 1998, 205). Nevertheless, since the mid-1980s there is an increased focus, nationally and internationally, on the teaching of skills, techniques, as well as of art history, aesthetics, art criticism and the making of art. This has been influenced by Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory as well as the Italian educational art model of Reggio Emilia (Freedman, 1985; Gardner, 1990; Seefeldt, 1995; Dighe, Calomiris, & van Zutphen, 1998; Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998)

Reggio Emilia

Through the Reggio Emilia approach art and art education are increasingly seen as social, cultural and cognitive activities (Freedman, 1985; Gardner, 1990; Seefeldt, 1995; Dighe, Calomiris, & van Zutphen, 1998). This child-directed and holistic model seems to address all of the dichotomies discussed in this paper. It advocates children's active construction of knowledge through the integration of the arts within "a rich and complex set of relationships and interactions with the adults around them, the peer group and an 'amiable' learning environment" (MacNaughton & Williams, 1998, p.299). Children, teachers, parents, and community are working cooperatively as critical inquirers, linking research, theory and practice (Seefeldt, 1995). Adults carefully time their interventions in children's learning to encourage the use of the many forms of symbolic language to express their ideas and further their understanding of art production, art history, art criticism and aesthetics (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998). The process is considered as important as the product (Berkley, 1995). There is no separation between the academic and non-academic modes, thinking and feeling, play and work, as there is the acceptance of tacit knowledge and the "lived experience" or the deeper meanings that lie behind [the experience]" (Efland, 1990, p.131). How much attention ultimately will be given in the early childhood art curriculum in Aotearoa New Zealand to the components of creating art works, art history, art criticism and art response, will no doubt be determined by what teachers believe is important (Smith, 1992). There is no doubt that children in this setting are able to translate their art discoveries and learning into meaningful art works (Vecchi, 2002).

Conclusion

The history of early childhood art education in Aotearoa New Zealand is marked by shifts in theory and practice. The overriding paradigm for visual art education in the early childhood education sector has been one of developmentally- and individually-appropriateness with an emphasis on process, self-direction, and the role of the teacher as passive (Chapman, 1978; Gardner, 1990; Wright, 1991; Engel, 1995; Seefeldt, 1995; Gunn, 2000). At present a slow shift towards a more cognitive approach to arts education is happening under the influence of Reggio Emilia and Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory. However, developmental, progressive education and psycho-analytical theories and philosophies still dominate practices in the early childhood art curriculum with their inherent dichotomies of process versus product, academic versus non-academic, integration versus segregation of the arts, free play versus adult-direction, and play versus work (Wright, 1991; Ritchie, 1999; Gunn, 2000). These dichotomies call for strong debates on the value of early childhood art and art education to address what one could regard as the sector's confusion about its basic aims and purposes (Smith, 1992). The ultimate aim should be an early childhood art education model in Aotearoa New Zealand based on a solid epistemological rationale (Siegesmund, 1998).

References

- Althouse, R., Johnson, M. H., & Mitchell, S.T. (2003). Integrating art into the early childhood curriculum. In R. Althouse, M.H. Johnson, & S.T. Mitchell, *The colors of learning: Integrating the visual arts into the early childhood curriculum* (pp.1-11). New York: Teachers College Press and Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Berk, L. (2001). *Development through the lifespan* (2nd ed.). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Berkely, D. (1995). Reggio Emilia: The hundred languages of children. *Tracks, Issue 11*, Term 2, 6-14. Publisher: Unknown.
- Betenas, E. (1985). Is there an ideal model for art education? In B. Wilson & H. Hoffa (Eds.). *The history of art education* (pp. 99-101). Proceedings from the Penn State Conference Pennsylvania: National Art Education Association.
- Brownlee, P. (1983). *Magic places: Young children's creative art work*. Auckland: New Zealand Playcentre Federation.
- Chapman, L.H. (1978). A perspective on art education. In L. H. Chapman (Ed.). *Approaches to art in education* (pp.4-21). New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Chalmers, F. (1990). South Kensington in the farthest colony. In D. Soucy & M.A. Stankiewicz, (Eds.). *Framing the past: Essays on art education* (pp.71-85). Reston, VA: The National Art Education Association.
- Clark, R. (1996). *Art education: Issues in postmodernist pedagogy*. Reston, VA: Canadian Society for Education through Art and the National Art Education Association.
- David, T. (2001). Curriculum in the early years. In G. Pugh (Ed.). *Contemporary issues in the early years: Working collaboratively for children* (pp.55-56). London: Paul Chapman.
- Dighe, J., Calomiris, Z., & Van Zutphen, C. (January 1998). Nurturing the language of art in children. *Young Children, January 1998*, 4-9. Washington DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Edwards, C., Gandini, L., & Forman, G. (Eds.). (1998). *The hundred languages of children: The Reggio Emilia approach - advanced reflections* (2nd ed.). London: Ablex.

- Efland, A. (1990). Art education in the twentieth century: A history of ideas. In D. Soucy & M.A. Stankiewicz (Eds.). *Framing the past: Essays on art education* (pp. 117-136). Reston, VA: The National Art Education Association.
- Engel, B.S. (1995). *Considering children's art: Why and how to value their works*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Epstein, A.S. (May 2001). Thinking about art: Encouraging art appreciation in early childhood settings. *Young Children*, Vol. 56, 3, 38-43. Washington DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Eisner, E. W., & Ecker, D. W. (1970). Some historical developments in art education. In G. Pappas (Ed.), *Concepts in art and education* (pp. 12-25). Ontario: Macmillan.
- Eisner, E. W. (1972). How artistic learning occurs. In E. W. Eisner (Ed.), *Educating artistic vision* (pp. 65-111). New York: Macmillan.
- Freedman, K. (1985). Art education and the development of the academy: The ideological origins of curriculum theory. In B. Wilson and H. Hoffa (Eds.), *The history of art education*. Proceedings from the Penn State Conference (pp. 19-27). State Conference. Pennsylvania: National Art Education Association.
- Gardner, H. (1990). *Art education and human development*. Los Angeles: The Getty Center for Education in the Arts.
- Gunn, A. C. (2000). Teachers' beliefs in relation to visual art education in early childhood centres. *New Zealand Research in Early Childhood Education*, 3, 153-163.
- Hancock, S. (2003). *Earthen treasures: Clay play for young children*. Auckland: New Zealand Playcentre Federation.
- Kellogg, R., & O'Dell, S. (1967). *The psychology of children's art*. New York: Random House.
- Korzenic, D. (1990). A developmental history of art education. In D. Soucy & M.A. Stankiewicz. (Eds.). *Framing the past: Essays on art education* (pp.201-212). Reston, VA: The National Art Education Association.
- Lewis, T. (1998/99). Early childhood art education: A dilemma for students and teacher educators. *Journal of Educational Research*, 4(1), 61-68.
- Lowenfeld, V., & Brittain, W. L. (1982). *Creative and mental growth* (7th Ed.). New York: Macmillan.

-
- MacNaughton, G., & Williams, G. (1998). *Techniques for teaching young children: Choices in theory and practice*. Frenchs Forest NSW: Addison Wesley Longman Australia.
- Matthews, J. (1996). The young child's early representation and drawing. In G.M. Blenkin & A.V. Kelly (Eds.). *Early childhood education: A developmental curriculum* (2nd ed.) (pp. 154-183). London: Paul Chapman.
- May, H. (1997). *The discovery of early childhood*. Auckland: Auckland University Press/Bridget Williams Books with the New Zealand Council for Educational Research.
- May, H. (2001). *Politics in the playground: The world of early childhood in postwar New Zealand*. Wellington: Bridget Williams Books/New Zealand Council for Educational Research.
- McFee, J.K. (1961). Theories of child art. In J.K. McFee (Ed. *Preparation for art* (pp.147-165). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Read, H. (1961). *Education through art* (3rd Ed.). London: Faber and Faber.
- Ritchie, L. (September 1999). *Mana reo: Communication in early childhood programmes through the integration of the expressive arts*. In Proceedings, Seventh Early Childhood Convention, Nelson.
- Roopnarine, J.L., & Johnson, J.E. (2000). Historical perspectives on early childhood education. In J.L. Roopnarine and J.E. Johnson. *Approaches to early childhood education* (3rd ed.) (pp.3-37). Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
- Seefeldt, C. (March 1995). Art: A serious work. *Young Children*, 39-45. Washington, DC: The National Association for the Education for Young Children.
- Schirmacher, R. (1993). *Art and creative development for young children* (2nd Ed.). Albany, NY: Delmar.
- Siegesmund, R. (1998). Why do we teach art today? Conceptions of art education and their justification. *Studies in Art Education*, 39(3), 197-214.
- Sienkiewicz, C. (1985). The Froebelian kindergarten as an art academy. In B. Wilson and H. Hoffa (Eds.). *The history of art education* (pp.125-137). Proceedings from the Penn State Conference. Pennsylvania: National Art Education Association.
- Smith, R.A. (1992). Problems for a philosophy of art education. *Studies in Art Education*, 33(4), 253-266.
- Sullivan, G. (1993). Art-based art education: Learning that is meaningful, authentic, critical and pluralist. *Studies in Art Education*, 35(1), 5-21.

Vecchi, V. (Ed.). (May 2002). *Theatre curtain: The ring of transformations*. Reggio Emilia: Reggio Children.

Wright, S. (Ed.). (1991). *The arts in early childhood*. Sydney: Prentice Hall.