

IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION, SHOULD THE ADULT'S ROLE IN THE VISUAL ARTS BE HANDS-ON OR HANDS-OFF, OR IS THERE A ROLE WHICH IS SOMEWHERE IN-BETWEEN OR SOMEWHERE BEYOND?

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INTRODUCTION

Early childhood teaching practice doesn't just happen. Underpinning every action and every plan is a body of personal and professional experience and literature that has informed the teacher's pedagogy. Yet, in the professional role, the essence of the teacher; the deeply personal side of who the teacher is, may be visible in practice or it may not.

In the teaching profession as in other professions there are expectations to "behave professionally;" that is, behave in a way that is an individual display of the profession's collective aspirations. This means that the personal self may be reduced in comparison to the professional self, and ultimately, as in the view that is expressed in this paper, dominant views of pedagogy may supersede the personal beliefs and values of a teacher.

It is recognised in early childhood communities that children's experiences through the visual arts provide rich learning opportunities.¹ However, the role of the teacher within this framework has had less scrutiny. Eckhoff further contends that one contributing factor may be early childhood educators' lack of training or experiences with the visual arts. This aspect of tertiary programmes for early childhood teacher education needs to be researched. Essentially, what is the dominant pedagogy that early childhood student teachers study in their studies of the visual arts? Pre-service teacher education traditionally combines practical experience and theory to inform student teachers' philosophy. Although teacher education is not part of the current research, we moot that the content of teacher education papers, particularly regarding the visual arts, needs to be critiqued against constructivist, sociocultural and postmodern paradigms.

CONSTRUCTIVIST: SOCIOCULTURAL

Although a sociocultural approach is currently dominant in early childhood education, in relation to the visual arts the approach shifts back to a Piagetian, constructivist view. Is the impact of traditional, dominant ideas so powerful, and the rational self, the critical approach to curriculum, and personal values and beliefs so subdued that it continues to underpin aspects of early childhood education practice in the visual arts? Richards contends that, in the spirit of sociocultural theory, a critiquing of "taken-for-granted" teaching practices about the visual arts may be timely.²

The mantra of "hands off" in the visual arts is in contradiction to sociocultural theory. The Piagetian view that children drive their own learning, construct their own learning, has been displaced to a large extent through the writings of Vygotsky and subsequent researchers and authors. Vygotsky's theory makes sense: children learn both through their own exploration and through their interactions with others, including more skilled others. Further, from a postmodern view, the notion that teachers are not agents in the child's art experience is inauthentic.

Sorin talks about the agentic child, the child as an agent in her learning.³ Applying this notion to the teacher, we position the teacher as agentic. A modernist 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. Conversely, we contend that the agentic teacher, fully present in his beliefs and values about the arts, does. A depersonalising of the teacher's role has led to teachers being seen as resourcers of environments, providers of rich teaching and learning environments, but in relation to where teachers are positioned in the milieu of children's artistic experiences, the teacher remains rooted in the hands-off/onlooker discourse.

Gibbons contends that both children and adults are "expected" to passively absorb the dominant assumptions, values and beliefs attached to the so-called "expert knowledge about play," and puts a case forward for a problematising or drawing out of these assumptions that until recently have largely been unchallenged.⁴ Parallels to Gibbons can be made in regard to the visual arts setting in early childhood, where, through a renegotiation and re-opening of the discourse regarding adults' involvement in children's artistic experiences, new paradigms based on teacher knowledge and critical discourse may be constructed and realised.

We contend that the dominant pedagogy about the arts impacts on the voices of teachers. Yet, there is some evidence of subtle shifts. Some of the shifts in thinking are evident in the teacher's voices that are expressed in our research into the teacher's role in children's art experiences. However, what we found through the conversations was that most of the teachers do not want to shift away from the idea that children "own" their art experiences. Teachers use language that encourages and extends and they give guidance on technical skills and tools, but for the teachers in our research, "drawing with children" was not evident. Essentially then, they were hands-on in terms of providing resources and through technical advice, through modelling, but the art was the children's own. This is a prevailing strong principle in the visual arts in early childhood education.

In this paper we explore some of the literature which underpins the hands-off model as well as that which demonstrates a shift to a sociocultural theory approach to the visual arts. There continues to be a dominant discourse that calls for "hands-off," yet there is a growing body of literature that calls for a shift in thinking, that expresses discomfort with the hands-off approach to the adult's role in the visual arts.

DISCOURSE AND PRACTICE

A book that has had a particularly powerful impact on the teacher's role in the visual arts in Aotearoa New Zealand is *Magic Places* by Pennie Brownlee.⁵ This aesthetically beautiful book gives the clear message that "we never draw, make or model for the young child."⁶ This message gives no room for any interpretation other than that adults' practice in the visual arts must be hands-off, a notion which is strongly embedded in the idea of the creative process and product belonging to the child.

Ashton challenges the romanticised notions of creativity and originality in children's art and advocates instead for "multiple art genres" which the teacher models in "safe supporting environments."⁷ While it is our contention that there are teachers who would like to collaborate more with children in their art experiences, Ji Hi Bae suggests that in their pre-service education, teachers do not have sufficiently rich art experiences themselves and so do not know how to be effective art teachers in early childhood contexts.⁸ She describes three approaches to the arts – the "little-intervention" orientation, the product orientation and the guided exploration orientation. In relation to our discussion, these could be set along the continuum of hands-off to hands-on. She says further that the little-intervention approach is being criticised for discounting the value of teacher input. While the product orientation, which is effectively direct teaching, has been frowned upon for some time, there continue to be teachers who over-plan and expect children to fit in with these plans in order to create a product. The third orientation, guided exploration, is based on the intervention of the teacher through language, guiding observation and teaching techniques. This orientation is closer to the respectful hands-on approach which we are exploring. But it is still

distant from the notion that the teacher is also an artist and that the teacher may participate in the child's art experience, may draw alongside or paint alongside the child, when the skilled teacher intuitively knows that the moment is "right." Getting this "right" in practice is a challenge, but it is through opening up the discourse, exploring new ideas and ideals that we can find a new way and reclaim the authentic teaching self in the arts.

In 2007, in an attempt to open up the dialogue, we began a research project that involved working with early childhood teachers and exploring their role in the visual arts.

RESEARCH

We were fortunate that four teams from early childhood centres in Auckland agreed to participate in this research. One centre is a community centre, another a full-day care centre and two centres are sessional kindergartens. In a structured focus-group style, we presented central questions regarding the visual arts in early childhood education, including, *How do you see your role?*

A few of the responses to those questions are presented here.

Question: *How do you see your role?*

Three teachers' responses:

- a. *Children know what they want to do – [they] have ideas and they want to express them – and just like us ... we come in the morning and set up activities, but I believe in taking cues from the children.*
- b. *Sometimes just putting out a simple activity of paint and paintbrushes and letting them go for it –but sometimes you want to challenge them with new ideas.*
- c. *I think about it as being similar to when you build a house and you have a whole pile of bricks and mortar in the front yard and you wouldn't have a clue what to do with it. You would go and seek some advice, you would look at other people's ideas and plans. I feel the same way about art, and that's what we scaffold the children through – to have the basic techniques. The actual creativity is theirs, but to be able to show them the techniques to use watercolours painting, to show them how they can use resources for collage, and then they can go and use their techniques for their art. I feel that to have the basic techniques is quite important. Techniques to be able to show children – to have the basic techniques is very important.*

If we view these answers to the questions on the adult's role in isolation, out of context, without taking a bigger picture of later conversations, they fit loosely into Ji Hi Bae's orientation spectrum. It seems that in responses a) and b) the message from the teachers is that their role is to set up resources, and then it is up to the child to work with them largely unaided – which fits into a hands-off/little-intervention approach; whereas in c) the teacher is more "hands-in," more like the guided exploration orientation, purposefully preparing the child for the arts experience.

Within any of these approaches, it must be noted that the teacher's role along the continuum may work differently at different times during the day or the week. Teachers may move into the guided exploration orientation and out of it as they feel that this response is needed by the child. The hands-on or hands-off standpoint is not necessarily a constant way of approaching the child and the visual arts, although it may consistently be the way that a teacher is likely to respond.

EXPLORING THE NOTION OF HANDS-ON, HANDS-IN TO HANDS-OFF AND BEYOND

In pursuing this movement along the continuum, we looked for ways of describing the responses from the teacher. To this end we have defined the teacher roles as *onlooker*, *technician*, *artist* and an *open-ended* possibility yet to be defined. The onlooker fits into the hands-off category and is adapted from the onlooker role in Parten's powerful, although currently less popular, model of hierarchical social categories of play.⁹ In applying this notion to a teacher's role, onlooker teachers adopt the "set up and stand back" stance. The teacher becomes an outside observer of the action, a provider of resources.

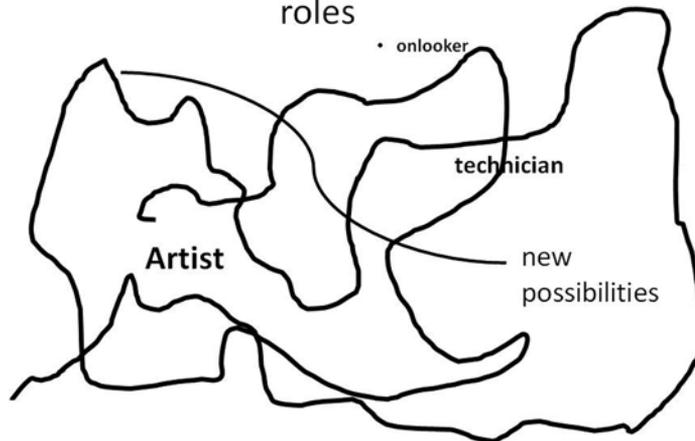
In the role of technician the teacher becomes hands-in. In this context the teacher can be seen as a technician or technical adviser; providing resources, verbal cues and assistance with techniques. This is the more skill-based orientation.

The third level on the continuum is the teacher as artist. The mantra which is heard frequently in early childhood education – *every child is an artist* – is a powerful reminder of the essential joy and creativity to be found in children's art. But the adult's role is missing. Are we artists? Perceiving ourselves as artists raises new insights and awareness and possibilities as to where collaborative art experiences and co-learning could go. What are the possibilities if the child could see the teacher as artist? Does this increase the possibilities for collaboration and joint experience?

Finally there is the idea that there are new, unidentified possibilities, other aspects on the continuum, or off the continuum. We hope to return to this aspect as we work with teachers on this research.

In the overview of the teacher's role we have attempted in the diagram below to illustrate the complexity and the "to-ing" and "fro-ing" of the interaction, the movement of the teacher and child in their relationship with each other and with the visual arts. We hope that this illustrates something of the busyness, the complexity and of the movement between one approach and another, and between the teacher and child. The teacher as artist is the role that we are increasingly interested in. If teachers are artists (in whatever form this label means to them) outside of the centre, then to be true to who they are, to be agentic, we contend that they should also be permitted, indeed encouraged, to be artists in the centre.

Teacher Presence: embodiment of multiple roles



clark & de lautour, 2009

Figure 1: The multiple roles of the early childhood teacher in relation to the visual arts.

SUMMARY

This paper reflects the questions which we are asking and which are being asked by some teachers about the adult's role in children's visual arts experiences. How much of our personal self is evident in our professional self? Further, if teachers believe that they should draw alongside children, or collaborate with them on an artwork when invited, or gift a picture to them, then should this be acceptable? Teachers sing with, play with, climb with, dance with children. What is it about the visual arts that favours hands-off?

We plan to continue to ask the questions: Should the adult's role in the visual arts be hands-on or hands-off, or somewhere in between? What potential is there when the teacher is agentic, that is, when the teacher is the main agent in how the visual arts are supported in early childhood education? How can pre-service teacher education support the early childhood teacher to be a strong facilitator of the visual arts?

Through our research with early childhood teachers, we hope to explore these questions further, to find ways together to see how both children and adults can be supported through rich, meaningful art experiences that are underpinned by respect for the child and for each other, in pursuit of wonder and the potential for joy and meaning that can be part of visual art experiences, either individual or collaborative or somewhere in between and beyond.

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- 5 Penny Brownlee, *Magic Places. A Guide for Adults to Encourage Young Children's Art Work* (Auckland: New Zealand Playcentre Federation, 1983); idem, *Magic Places: A Guide for Adults to Encourage Young Children's Creative Art Work* (Auckland: New Zealand Playcentre Federation, 2004).
- 6 Brownlee, *Magic Places. A Guide for Adults to Encourage Young Children's Art Work*, 23.
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- 9 John W Santrock, *A Topical Approach to Life-span Development*, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2007).