



# An introduction to the visual arts in early childhood education



ECE resources

The visual arts encompass an extensive range of visual modes that children utilise for expressing, communicating, mediating their thinking, engaging in aesthetic exploration and research. What is defined as visual arts is shaped by cultural and social values. Some common examples include painting, clay work, sculpture, collage, weaving, construction, photography, wearable art, carving, printing and ephemera, although there are many more modes of visual expression and exploration.

## How do the visual arts support children's learning?

Thinking of the visual arts in early childhood education can initially evoke an image of a child standing at an easel, thick stubby paintbrush in hand with bright acrylic poster paint spreading quickly across the page. However, research has shown the visual arts to be a rich domain through which young children can explore and represent their experiences, think through and deepen their [working theories](#), and develop their creative thinking. It is through the visual arts that children learn about the symbolic systems of representation and communication valued by their communities. The visual arts support children's learning in a number of ways:

### Facilitating communication

For pre-literate children, the visual arts are a primary means through which they can explore and share their perceptions of their world. The visual arts can help children to communicate ideas that cannot be expressed verbally, which is particularly important for children with English as a second language. The meanings of children's art works are not always obvious but, in some cases, the act of creating art can encourage children to talk as they work. When this occurs, both the artwork and the dialogue that occurs alongside are equally important in helping teachers to better understand the child's thinking<sup>1</sup>.

The visual arts also support children to communicate with each other, particularly when teachers create opportunities for them to work on shared projects or to explore common interests together. Such opportunities encourage children to exchange ideas, consider solutions and develop shared meanings through collaboration. These experiences may also encourage children to develop their verbal language<sup>2</sup>.

### Mediating thinking

Researchers have built upon Vygotsky's theory that language acts as a tool to mediate thinking to suggest that visual arts could work in a similar way and found that children's visual representations are more closely connected to thought than verbal language is<sup>3</sup>. When children create visual arts in groups, the act of representing thinking visually allows them to share their ideas with others. This supports them to transform their understandings through co-construction. In such an environment, children can try out new ideas as well as strategies for working with visual media, inspired by their peers, which they internalise and then draw upon later in different contexts. In this way, the visual arts support children to develop their metacognitive capacities.

### Developing an appreciation for diverse points of view

A wonderful aspect of the visual arts is that there is never one right answer. The visual arts offer multiple solutions to a problem or ways that an idea can be expressed. When children have opportunities to view each other creating visual arts, and to talk about the ideas they are exploring through their art, they can

develop an appreciation for different perspectives and an understanding that knowledge is subjective, that there is no one 'truth' or correct answer.

### **Developing cultural knowledge and fostering identity formation**

Researchers also assert that the visual arts, alongside other arts domains, are a primary means through which cultural identity and associated values are shared with young children<sup>4</sup>, and argue that it is important that teachers develop understanding of how the visual arts are valued by families and communities as a basis for creating culturally responsive visual arts curriculum<sup>5</sup>. For children, experiencing the visual arts valued by their cultures within their early childhood settings can transmit powerful messages about how they and their families are valued. It is also vital that children are exposed to many different examples of the visual arts so that they can develop an appreciation of a range of culturally diverse art forms within their early years. This can be achieved by connecting with local community organisations such as galleries, artist studios and important cultural sites like the local marae.

### **Promoting creativity and imagination**

The visual arts allow children to enter imaginative worlds, to be creative and to engage in playful thinking. Developing children's imaginations is important for learning to show empathy for others. Creativity is the capacity to develop unique ideas and solutions that are of value. The visual arts invite experimentation and exploration, and as such, support the development of creativity and what has been described as 'possibility thinking'<sup>6</sup>. Fostering possibility thinking develops key dispositions of learning such as problem solving, perseverance, collaboration and seeking support from others<sup>7</sup>.

### **Exploring aesthetics and the language of art**

For some children, visual arts are a means to explore colour, texture and the possibilities of visual media. These children relish opportunities to develop skills and techniques. Research has highlighted how important it is that children have opportunities to conceptualise their own art making in addition to opportunities to create in group contexts<sup>8</sup>. This allows them the space to immerse themselves in aesthetic exploration should they wish.

### **Developing critical literacy**

Teaching children to interpret or 'read' visual modes of communication is becoming increasingly important in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as children are constantly exposed to visual texts and multimodal texts<sup>9</sup>. Multimodal texts are those that include two or more ways of conveying messages, such as combining text and image. Some researchers argue that it is crucial that teachers talk with children about the images they encounter in their everyday environment, discussing how meanings have been conveyed by the artist or illustrator<sup>10</sup>. This helps children to understand that images, like stories, are constructed and that they communicate messages. This is the first step in developing the ability to critically analyse visual texts, a vital skill in a world saturated by images. Talking with children about images also allows them to understand that they too, have the capacity to create images, to communicate ideas to others, or to explore ideas for themselves.

### **Offering emotional support**

For some children, artmaking is their primary means of processing their experiences. For these children, engagement in visual arts can impact their emotional wellbeing, allowing them transition into the day, or into a new centre environment. Research has also found that art making has the potential to significantly reduce stress levels<sup>11</sup>: it is important for children to have access to tools for art making throughout the day and particularly in the morning as a means to support these children to settle into the day.

## Why is the teacher's role so important in supporting and facilitating visual arts experiences?

Teachers play pivotal roles in how children experience the visual arts in early childhood. This is because it is teachers who create the classroom environment, who decide what visual arts materials are available and when, and who choose where and when children will engage in the visual arts. Currently, teachers' practices in the visual arts vary greatly. In New Zealand, teachers often have widely different views about how visual arts should be taught in the early years. This can make it hard to understand what is appropriate and when.

Some teachers believe in a hands-off approach. Teachers who advocate for this approach can be informed by the belief that the child is innately creative. They believe their role is to provide the materials and a supportive environment but that the children can do it themselves. They perceive adult interference to negatively impact the child's creativity. Critique of this approach argues that sociocultural theories have helped us to understand that children are in fact influenced by everything, their relationships, their environment, their culture and the materials with which they interact. These theories highlight that learning is a social experience: therefore, to create in isolation without feedback, discussion and interaction hinders artist development<sup>12</sup>. In fact, children crave interaction, feedback and discussion about their ideas, creations and interests.

In contrast, a teacher-directed approach is becoming increasingly adopted by some early childhood teachers<sup>13</sup>. In these cases, teachers plan prefabricated activities for children that are often inspired by websites such as Pinterest. This is the kind of artwork where it can be difficult to differentiate one child's work from another. Such activities can feel 'safe' for teachers because there are no surprises and they can control the outcome. However, too many teacher-directed experiences can negatively impact children's self-efficacy in the arts and they can become reliant on the teacher for guidance and instruction<sup>14</sup>.

A lack of personal confidence in visual arts may be one factor that prompts teachers to adopt a teacher-directed approach. Research has shown that a lack of self-efficacy in the arts often begins within one's own schooling experiences<sup>15</sup>. Many teachers, when prompted, can trace back to the moment in their lives when a teacher or important role model criticised, over-directed or controlled their artmaking<sup>16</sup>. The result of such negative experiences can mean that teachers can avoid any further learning in the visual arts and can experience anxiety when thinking about planning for the visual arts as part of their own teaching.

These two approaches offer either too little or too much guidance from teachers. When teachers adopt a more moderately guided approach to supporting children's artmaking, they co-construct understanding with children through visual media and support children to develop skills and confidence to use the visual arts as a tool for learning whilst also maintaining children's agency as [capable and confident learners](#).

## How teachers can build their confidence to plan and implement a rich visual arts curriculum

There are several ways that teachers can build their personal confidence and pedagogical knowledge to teach the visual arts in the early years. An important starting point is self-reflection. This could be a personal journey or part of a shared centre-wide inquiry. Reflecting about personal history with the visual arts can enable teachers to identify when and how their confidence was lost in the first place. There is real value in sharing the memories of these experiences within teaching teams. This can be an effective strategy for building a shared philosophy of the visual arts by deciding together how the visual arts could be valued and woven into the curriculum. It is also important to have these discussions with families. Asking how the visual arts are valued in children's homes and cultures and inviting parents and caregivers with visual arts expertise to spend time sharing their knowledge with the children (and teachers) can serve

to strengthen partnerships and actively embrace multiple perspectives concerning how the visual arts can be valued.

It is vital that teachers have both practical and pedagogical knowledge of the visual arts. There is great value in playing with visual arts materials before offering them to children. Teachers could sign up to an evening class or organise a professional learning event in order to develop new techniques or understandings of different art genres. It is much easier to support children's art making when you can truly empathise with the challenges of working with different media. Teachers can then engage in authentic conversations with children about art making, which many children relish<sup>17</sup>. The same can be said for pedagogical knowledge. Professional development that develops theoretical understanding of the impacts of different teaching approaches is another vehicle through which teachers can examine and perhaps reframe how they view children as learners. This in turn fundamentally impacts how they respond as teachers.

### How teachers can incorporate the visual arts into their practice

There are a number of strategies and practices that teachers can use to support and promote children's experiences of the visual arts in their practice.

- Spend some time in your centre thinking about what your visual arts environment and the materials you offer communicate to children and families about **how your centre values the visual arts**. Consider whether this is in alignment with your centre's overarching philosophy.
- If you decide you want to change or increase the kinds of materials you offer, consider what can be **sourced for free**. Rich visual arts materials don't necessarily have to cost anything. Natural materials can be thoughtfully collected for ephemeral art. Recycled materials can be arranged aesthetically for children to create three dimensional sculptures.
- If you don't have a **dedicated space for visual arts making** already, think about creating one. This can be as simple as moving the furniture around. There are significant impacts on children's capacity to be creative for sustained periods of time when they have a dedicated space for art making<sup>18</sup>.
- Think about placing **visual arts materials in other spaces** throughout your centre: for example clipboards, paper and pencils in the construction area can invite children to plan their work, evaluate its success and, after a construction is completed, remember how it was created.
- Invite children to **create visual arts in groups** based on their personal or shared interests. Stay with them, asking questions and documenting their work and responses (with their permission). Documenting children's visual arts is one way you can recognise and affirm this is a domain that is valued.
- **Talk to children about their artwork**, create opportunities for exchange and discussion amongst children.
- Give children opportunities to revisit their work. Save artwork till the next day and **invite children to evaluate their work** and decide if they would like to continue to work on it.
- **Try not to put too much emphasis on representation**. Children utilise a range of modes for exploration through the visual arts. It is easy to assume they are representing 'something' but often it can be that they are engaged in aesthetic exploration instead.
- **Ensure the same materials are available for children each day**. It can be useful to imagine the visual arts as a verbal language. To learn a language, you have to practise and practise. The visual arts require similar dedication and determination. If we want children to become proficient visual arts makers, we shouldn't change the language daily<sup>19</sup>. Keep materials like graphite pencils out all of the

time. Think about creating a dedicated clay workshop or a print making station with space for work to be stored until the next day.

- Finally, don't feel afraid to **create alongside children**. Although you probably won't create a masterpiece when the children you are working with are creating their first representational figures, there is great value in teachers role modelling personal enjoyment in the visual arts. The key is to first create an environment of respect, collaboration and exchange between the children and their teachers. Once children feel truly valued, they will relish opportunities to engage in playful art making and interchange with their teachers and their peers<sup>20</sup>.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Wright, S. (2007). Young children's meaning-making through drawing and 'telling': Analogies to filmic textual features. *Australian Journal of Early Education*, 32(4), 37-48.

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<sup>6</sup> Craft, A., McConnon, L., & Matthews, A. (2012). Child-initiated play and professional creativity: Enabling four-year-olds' possibility thinking. *Thinking Skills and Creativity*, 7(1), 48-61.

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<sup>11</sup> Kaimal, G., Ray, K., & Muniz, J. (2016). Reduction of cortisol levels and participants' responses following art making. *Art Therapy*, 33(2), 74-80.

- <sup>12</sup> Richards, R. (2007). Outdated relics on hallowed ground: Unearthing attitudes and beliefs about young children's art. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 32(4), 22-30.
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- <sup>15</sup> McArdle (2012).
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- <sup>18</sup> Pairman, A. (2018). *Living in this space: Case studies of children's lived experiences in four spatially diverse early childhood centres*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, Victoria University, Wellington, New Zealand.
- <sup>19</sup> McArdle (2012).
- <sup>20</sup> Probine (2018).

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