



What role should teachers take in children's visual arts experiences?



ECE resources

There is no one 'best' approach to teaching and supporting the visual arts with young children, and in fact there are many different and competing perspectives. This is partly due to ongoing debates about how children's development in the visual art occurs. It is important to reflect upon your own experiences and understandings about the visual arts, your identity, how the visual arts occur in your own culture, and how these affect your pedagogy¹.

Contemporary approaches to arts education

Contemporary understandings of arts education have largely been influenced by Vygotsky's theories about the sociocultural nature of learning, which suggest that children's artistic abilities can be enhanced through interaction with others². These theories challenge previous approaches in which teachers took a hands-off approach to children's art-making, leaving children to engage in free play with a wide range of art materials without any adult intervention³. This non-interventionist approach was motivated by a particular concern for supporting children's personal and emotional expression through art-making, and by ideas that children's art followed a consistent and universal sequence of progression which could not be influenced by adults. It was thought that the only way to ensure developmentally appropriate art experiences and free expression was to allow children to direct their own art activities⁴.

Sociocultural approaches to education argue that children's shared art activities with more experienced peers and adults are important for facilitating children's development in the visual arts. Children learn about the visual arts from their interactions with teachers and peers before they develop these skills and knowledges for themselves⁵. This means that children's self-expression is best supported by carefully designed and [intentional teaching](#) that promotes skills and knowledge development. Contemporary practice in early childhood education, based on sociocultural theories of learning, views the visual arts as a tool for thinking and inquiry. Children are encouraged to use visual modes to think about and make sense of the world and to solve problems⁶. This more cognitive approach to arts provision in early childhood is influenced by the pedagogies of [Reggio Emilia](#)⁷, where teacher interaction, guidance and instruction is shown to support children's sustained engagement with complex creative arts. This is the approach to visual arts programmes in early childhood settings that we are going to explore further in this article.

Teacher scaffolding and support for children's art-making experiences

Children benefit from teacher interaction and support to develop skills and competencies in visual arts. While learning does occur through children's open-ended play with art materials, teachers should also be scaffolding learning and intentionally targeting specific skills and complex thinking⁸. There are a number of intentional strategies that teachers can use to scaffold learning and development in the arts.

Positioning the visual arts as a tool for thinking

Art-making enables children to think in divergent ways about a topic. It also immediately reflects back ideas to the child, so it is a powerful tool for enabling thinking and reflection⁹. When teachers position arts experiences as opportunities to think and communicate ideas, all learners can be encouraged to engage, not just those who have existing skills and confidence in making art.

To position the visual arts as a tool for thinking in your own practice you might:

- Intentionally provide regular and ongoing open-ended opportunities for spontaneous meaning-making and communicating ideas with visual arts materials. Attend to their art-making, listening to and joining conversations to be present to the narratives and meanings that emerge as they create.
- Encourage children to draw their ideas and thoughts, as drawing seems to support cognitive complexity and abstraction¹⁰.
- Discuss children's artworks in terms of the message or idea that the child aimed to convey rather than the aesthetic qualities of the work or how realistic they may be. You might ask children what they are discovering about their subject matter in the process of trying to make their art to emphasise thinking and meaning-making and to engage children at a complex cognitive level.
- Use drawing as a way of making notes when you go on field trips, which can help children to focus their attention and formulate and express a personal understanding. Viewing and discussing drawings in a group can help to mediate a broader understanding of the experience for each child.
- Share an expectation that it may take several attempts to effectively convey an idea. Keep children's artworks as a record of their developing thinking to be reviewed, reflected upon and communicated to others, and use artworks in displays to emphasise children's developing working theories and knowledge.

Creating a community of learners that use visual arts to think about and communicate ideas

Children's art-making can be used as a forum for exchanging ideas and to open up dialogue that is both cognitively challenging and engaging. Once shared, ideas are available for all the children to explore, and they may start to link and integrate each other's concepts and ideas in their artworks. In doing so, children are likely to build more complex concepts as well as more complex strategies for representing ideas¹¹.

To create a community of learners you might:

- **Promote a social context for art-making** by providing high quality, interesting and well-presented materials in a safe and comfortable space set aside for art-making.
- **Encourage children to engage with others socially** as they draw or create so that they can exchange ideas about what they are drawing and support each other in using materials and resources in particular ways. You might invite a child who has mastered a technique to show another child.
- **Promote dialogue in small groups** around children's explorations in the visual arts that focuses on observations of children's strategies for learning, thinking, and making meaning through the visual arts. For example, you might note a special technique that a child is using or discuss different ways of depicting objects and phenomena.
- **Encourage children to talk about, share, discuss, revisit and revise their artworks**, particularly in terms of the meaning and information contained in their drawing or artwork, to lead them to construct some shared understandings. You might then ask children to use the visual arts to represent their new, modified understandings.
- **Put artwork on display** in ways which demonstrate children's divergent thinking on the same topic or inquiry.

Encouraging artistic thinking processes and dispositions

It is important to identify, encourage and acknowledge children's creative and artistic thinking. The behaviours, dispositions and thinking skills that support the visual arts include engaging and sustaining attention, envisioning or imagining possibilities, observing details, evaluating processes and products, and being playful and creative. A disposition for creativity involves transforming or inventing something and actively creating meaning, with an eye for difference, transformation and innovation¹².

To teach artistic thinking skills and dispositions you might:

- **Support children to engage with a problem**, to focus and persist with it.
- **Encourage children to observe**, and to attend to visual details more closely than they ordinarily would, in order to see things that otherwise might not be seen.
- **Talk to children before they start building or making** to help them envisage what they might achieve, and to imagine the next steps. For example, if children are going to build a city, having a collaborative discussion about what each of them has seen and experienced in a city might help them envision possibilities and develop more elaborate mental pictures of what they are going to build. If they are making a model of their dog in clay, talking about what their dog feels like, and what she likes to play might support children to create a richer piece.
- **Help children evaluate what they have done**, particularly in relation to their ideas and intentions, and to critically reflect on their work in progress. You might ask where they struggled or had difficulty, how they resolved that, and what they might try differently next time. You might also support their ability to examine, analyse and interpret visual images and works. Note that contemporary approaches to arts education value a focus on both processes and products, and support children to evaluate their artworks, creative solutions and the processes and materials used according to their purpose or intention, as a way of promoting learning.
- **Encourage children to reach beyond their existing capability** to extend their ideas and explore what else might be possible, while embracing mistakes and accidents as learning opportunities. You might challenge children to add something to their artwork or representation, for example, to add another layer, balcony or turret to their block building or to populate it with some characters and create narratives.
- **Give feedback which is intentionally focused** on the specific skill you are helping the child to develop. For example, you might comment on the child's ability to observe carefully or point out what might need further attention.

Extending skills with particular media

Teachers should share their knowledge and skills about producing artworks, offer guidance, and model visual arts skills¹³. For example, you might teach children how to use tools (such as viewfinders and brushes) and materials (clay, charcoal, mixed media and paint) as well as about artistic conventions (colour-mixing, tones, perspective, use of space). Children's learning can best be extended when teachers provide scaffolding that is within each child's individual zone of proximal development¹⁴. This means being aware of where children are in their learning, and teaching them something that is just within reach (proximal) or an appropriate extension.

To teach skills for working with particular media you might:

- **Ensure children are familiar and have confidence with art materials and methods**. Show children how to hold tools and manipulate materials to support their fine motor skill development. Being present and developing shared attention with children during art experiences is very motivating for

children. You can watch for children's curiosity and exploration with visual art materials and build on their initial experimentation to develop skills.

- **Use children's individual artworks as a vehicle for discussing tools, materials, techniques and processes.** For example, help children to note variations in the qualities that are observable in their processes (drawing fast and slow lines) and products (the red colour that matches the colour of the child's shirt, or the way the smeary chalk lines look soft). In the block area, point out features of children's buildings and help them to notice the details of a construction.
- **Talk about the illustrations in picture books,** thinking about the ways in which artists or illustrators create feelings and messages, and the materials and techniques they use. Discuss the elements of images such as line, colour, placement and positioning, light source, and so on. You might encourage children to imagine what an illustration might look like before showing them, or to imagine how they would illustrate that part of the story, to develop their envisaging skills, or encourage their ability to expand ideas by suggesting other things the artist might have depicted.
- **Demonstrate processes and provide information in a way which inspires children** to try it out for themselves and to apply it to their intended art-making rather than following a step-by-step process. For example, if you want to encourage children to develop skill in building arches with blocks, you might post pictures of arches around the space and ask children to look at them and guess how they were made. You might ask children to anticipate what problems they might have and demonstrate ways to solve those problems, or create alongside children to help them develop further techniques and skills. It is important that there is not a predetermined outcome for art activities, which can lead teachers to have a (sometimes extremely) hands-on role in managing the process or making the item for children, severely limiting children's activity, autonomy and learning¹⁵.
- **Ask questions that encourage children to extend themselves or experiment.** You might ask children whether they want a smooth or bumpy texture on their clay model, or how easy it will be to make the model stand up. Can they think of ways to make the clay smooth? Can they test how strong the joints are between different parts of their model? In this way you help to articulate design challenges and problems, while leaving children in charge of solving them.
- **Encourage children to revisit artworks,** and to add to or re-work what is already there, which helps children to expand their repertoires. For example, they might work over dry media with wet.

Attending to multi-modal expression

Young children often express themselves in multi-modal ways using speech and non-verbal communication including facial expressions, gesture and bodily movement alongside visual language. Children might provide a verbal running narrative as they draw a map, or use gesture, sound effects and movement to describe what their clay monster figure is about. Attention to multimodal approaches can give a powerful insight into children's ideas, interests, intentions, concerns, culture and values¹⁶.

To attend to and value multi-modal expression you might:

- **Recognise when children need to use multimodal ways to describe their thinking and ideas,** and provide an (informal) audience for this, which can be you as the teacher, or other children. Being alert to the additional information that narrative, gesture and movement bring to children's meanings as they create an artwork leads to greater understanding of their art-making.
- **Play with different modalities yourself.** For example, use a high squeaky voice to make sound effects as you draw short little scribbles, and a lower pitch to make slow, thicker lines.

- **Challenge children to represent an idea in another modality.** For example, challenge children to draw a clay model they have made, or to create a 3D model of a map they have drawn.
- **Bring the visual arts into all areas of the curriculum.** The visual arts can be readily connected to other disciplines and topics in early childhood programmes.

Collaborative art-making

Active collaboration and shared engagement between teachers and children can support children's development in visual art-making as teachers position themselves as co-learners with children, listening to children's emerging meaning-making, sharing narration with them and experiencing their ways of constructing knowledge¹⁷. This can be more insightful than asking children about what they have created once it is complete. Drawing with children (on the same surface) can be powerful for opening up communication with children and learning more about their interests, ideas, and intentions, and for offering opportunities to expand on children's understandings and learning.

To try collaborative art-making in your own practice you might:

- **Support children's mark-making through verbal dialogue and gesture as well as co-drawing** to validate the child's work. For example, 'I like how you made thick lines. I am going to make thick lines too.'
- **Listen to, and contribute to, children's narration as they draw.** Talk with the child about what you are doing, attend to and share non-verbal gestures and expressions.
- **Use the marks that you observe children working with.** You might slow down some of the movements to make them more deliberate, or retrace the lines that children draw. Learn from the child, share and exchange skills with them to become familiar with different media and to expand your own artistic skills.
- **Try to work together, co-ordinating marks and drawings.** Don't try to control the child's mark-making, even if they move off the shared surface that you are using (instead, sustain your interest in the shared work which might encourage the child to return to it).
- **Look at and respond to the child's work.** Focus on colour and the use of material and support children's thinking, self-expression and communication of ideas, rather than aiming for a particular representation or level of realism.

Observing, interpreting and documenting art experiences and products

Children's art-making benefits from formative assessment so that appropriate and intentional teaching strategies can be developed to support their ongoing learning and development¹⁸. It is valuable to develop in-depth written, visual or photographic documentation of art experiences which have been closely observed and combined with knowledge about children's home activities and interests in order to best understand, assess, evaluate and plan for further art experiences.

For observing, interpreting and documenting art experiences you might:

- **Sensitively observe the process of children's art-making** (rather than just examining a finished product) and attend to the various multimodal ways of expressing meaning that children use in conjunction with their artistic process to see how the child's various marks can be distinguished and how they are ascribed meaning. Try to develop an empathy with what children are trying to communicate, being sensitive to the artistic processes that they have developed with a medium (which may still be exploratory). Take note of children's artistic choices, because how something is communicated is part of the overall meaning intended.

- **Consider the context which informs the art-making experience**, such as children's prior knowledge, personal experiences and cultural influences, as well as the environment in which they were drawing or making, and the social interactions that took place.
- **Communicate with children's parents and whānau** about children's art-making to develop your awareness of children's interests and activities.
- **Take a holistic approach to planning ongoing visual arts experiences** for children, recognising that the subject matter that children draw on for their visual art-making are a result of home and centre experiences, and can be fostered to enhance their understanding of a range of subjects.
- **Store children's artworks in a safe and accessible place** so that you have a record of their development in the visual arts.

Recommended further reading

Plows, L. (2015). Three-year-old children's visual art experiences. *NZ Research in Early Childhood Education Journal*, 18, 37 - 51.

Lindsay, G. (2016). Do visual art experiences in early childhood settings foster educative growth or stagnation? *International Art in Early Childhood Research Journal*, 5(1).

Knight, L. (2009). Mother and child sharing through drawing: Intergenerational collaborative processes for making artworks. *International Art in Early Childhood Research Journal*, 1.

Sheridan, K. M. (2017). Studio thinking in early childhood. In Narey, M. J. (Ed.) *Multimodal perspectives of language, literacy, and learning in early childhood: The creative and critical "art" of making meaning* (pp. 213-232). Springer.

Endnotes

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2. Brooks, M.L. (2017). Drawing to learn. In Narey, M. (Ed.), *Multimodal Perspectives of Language, Literacy, and Learning in Early Childhood. Educating the Young Child (Advances in Theory and Research, Implications for Practice)*, vol 12. Springer.
3. Narey, M. J. (2017). The creative "art" of making meaning. In: Narey M. (Ed.), *Multimodal Perspectives of Language, Literacy, and Learning in Early Childhood. Educating the Young Child (Advances in Theory and Research, Implications for Practice)*, vol 12. Springer.
4. Visser, J. (2005). The historical, philosophical and theoretical influences on early childhood visual arts education in Aotearoa New Zealand. *ACE papers, Issue 16: Approaches to Domain Knowledge in Early Childhood Pedagogy, Paper 2*.
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6. Narey, 2017.
7. Visser, 2005.

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- 14 .Cohen, L., & Uhry, J. (2011). Naming block structures: A multimodal approach. Early Childhood Education Journal, 39, 79–87.
- 15 .Narey, 2017.
- 16 .Plows, L. (2015). Three-year-old children's visual art experiences. NZ Research in Early Childhood Education Journal, 18, 37 - 51.
- 17 .Lindsay, 2016.
- 18 .Narey, 2017.

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