

# Teachers' Beliefs in Relation to Visual Art Education in Early Childhood Centres

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***ABSTRACT:** This paper inquires into what perspectives on visual art education informs teachers' beliefs in relation visual art programmes in early childhood centres in New Zealand. The literature has provided several perspectives from which visual art education can be viewed. Three of these were used in the study to examine teachers' beliefs about visual art, the rote, child-centred and cognitive orientations. Forty-one people working in a range of early childhood centres were surveyed. The study participants clearly favoured statements reflecting child-centred visual art theory. Little agreement for statements aligned with rote or cognitive perspectives was found. The place of child-centred, non-interventionist teaching beliefs and practices is questioned in light of cognitive theory that suggests a more active approach is required if teachers are to assist children's learning and development.*

## Introduction

Visual art is recognised as a core component of early childhood centre programmes in New Zealand and much is documented in professional literature in reference to children's artistic growth and development (Brownlee, 1983, Cherry, 1990, Henley, 1993, Jalongo & Stamp, 1998). Teachers have been guided since the late eighteenth century in terms of appropriate teaching practice in the discipline (see for instance, Freedman, 1997; Wilson, 1997). Teaching practices or approaches and the underlying beliefs of teachers who as Marme-Thompson (1995, p. 1) writes, "by design or default for guiding the course of children's artistic development" have yet to be extensively documented. This study was designed to investigate teachers' beliefs regarding visual art education in early childhood centre settings in New Zealand.

This study was undertaken as part of a larger masters research project. This broader project, Visual Art in Early Childhood Centres: Teachers' Beliefs and Practices (Gunn, 1998) investigated both teachers practice in relation to visual art education and their beliefs about the discipline. In this paper, the data relating to teachers' beliefs is being reported.

## **Perspectives on Visual Art Education**

At least three orientations related to the phenomenon of artistic growth and its associated teaching implications are documented in the literature. Several writers, for example, Bresler (1994), Kindler (1995), Wilson (1997), document developments in thinking relating to the teaching of visual art education throughout the twentieth century. In this paper the orientations have been labelled rote, child-centred and cognitive they are outlined briefly below.

A rote orientation to visual art in early childhood education reveals an approach centred on the provision of carefully structured and instructed experiences reflecting what in practice is known as “tabletop” activities. The late nineteenth century perspective on the teaching of visual art related clearly to the notion that children needed to develop good drawing technique and proper art skills. Teaching approaches were, according to Kindler (1995, p.11) “based on considerations of the nature of art rather than the special needs of children”. This preoccupation with the art activity is similar to the tabletop activity approach when consideration for the activity often overrides consideration for the unique needs of the child.

A rote approach to visual art is adult directive and product oriented. It has been described as one that has expectations of children developing “dexterity, fine motor skills, neatness, memorisation and the ability to follow directions” (Bresler, 1994, p.93). The notion of tabletop planning and tabletop activities is residual in many of our teaching practices in early childhood centres in New Zealand.

In the early part of the twentieth century the child study movement provoked interest in children’s drawings and what they may reveal about mental and emotional growth. A significant shift in the perception of visual art education as a source of creative and emotional expression took hold and was advanced by the psychologist and art educator Lowenfield (1947). Concurrently a range of theorists’, for example, Freud and Piaget documented their contributions and theories explaining human development from several perspectives. From the stage-developmentalists’ views, teachers found support for developmental perspectives on childhood and young children’s learning. In visual art changes in the course of children’s artistic growth and development could be charted in a linear format providing educators with a clear framework for their teaching approaches and beliefs.

Bresler’s (1994, p.99) description of a child-centred approach towards visual art is one that highlights “exploration, originality and imagination in the process of creation”. Such a programme is based on an estimation of children’s needs and interests and a concern with children’s developmental progress through stages is

featured strongly. This concern is not necessarily centred on children's artistic development, rather the focus is traditionally on the development of motor skills and co-ordination, a basic knowledge of media, and the notion of creative expression. There is a tendency in this approach to use thematic planning, giving consideration to children's needs and picking up on the topic of interest at the time.

In a child-centred programme we see evidence of Bredekamp and Rosegrant's (1992) "early childhood error" whereby early childhood educators prepare an appropriate environment for young children and then stand back from the environment without providing extensive support and guidance. Tinworth (1997, p.25) says a child-centred curriculum is a "professionally initiated curriculum, which is based on an estimation of the child's needs and interests". This approach to early childhood centre planning and young children's learning assumes that children actively explore and find meaning in a resource-rich environment and is viewed by many as appropriate stance to take in relation to visual art education. However, other perspectives on visual art education and children's learning and development suggest otherwise.

A Vygotskian perspective on children's learning and development accepts that adults or skilled peers must play an active role in children's experience if children's learning from the experience is to be maximised. This active stance in relation to visual art education is reflected in the cognitive orientation which is characterised by the emphasis on artistic activity and creation within a "cultural context, drawing on its values and accumulated body of discipline knowledge" (Bresler, 1994, p.101).

Here we see visual art as a complex activity involving symbol systems and the representation of thought in a variety of modes. The cognitive orientation places emphasis on visual art as a form of communication or language and highlights the visual arts as an important curriculum component in both an individual's cognitive experience and artistic development.

Gardner (1980, 1982) proposes that ability in the visual arts reflects children's knowledge of the media with which they work. Certainly the ability to manipulate tools to convey meaning is a complex cognitive task and much emphasis on children's ability to represent what they know through a focus on symbolic representation is a feature of the cognitive viewpoint.

Developing skills, knowledge and understanding in the discipline of visual art is reflected in the framework of the Getty Centre for Education in the Arts programme "Discipline Based Art Education" also known as DBAE (Dobbs, 1998). DBAE is a relatively long-standing North American initiative designed to cement visual art in the education system as a valid and rigorous domain of

study. It approaches visual art education from pre-school (early childhood education) through high school by teaching about art history, art criticism, art production and aesthetics. The basic thesis in DBAE is that children's / students' visual art education must be based on educating students in each of these sub-disciplines of visual art. In a cognitive perspective on visual art, skills, knowledge and understanding within the discipline are required if children are to be using the discipline as a vehicle for representation.

The cognitive orientation towards visual art is moved through the child-centred notion of creative expression towards the cognitive expression of knowledge and understanding. Creative expression is part of the by-product of this process, not the child-centred 'end place'. The cognitive perspective values both children's increasing competence in the domain and their ability to utilise this knowledge in creative and expressive ways to represent what they know.

It is the framework of these three perspectives on visual art education that provided the basis against which teacher's beliefs in relation to visual art in early childhood centres could be examined. The methodology employed to investigate the research question, "What beliefs do early childhood educators possess in regard to visual art education?" is described below.

## **Method**

### Participants

A sample of teachers and adults working and volunteering in nine early childhood centres in Christchurch city participated in this study. There were 41 participants, all female who worked in state kindergartens, playcentres, privately and community owned and operated all-day and sessional childcare centres. These educators worked with children aged between birth and school age (six years). There were trained, untrained or in-training participants in the sample reflecting the range of centres represented

### Procedure

After management consent was received from appropriate administrative bodies the early childhood centre staff in the sample were contacted in writing and invited to participate in the study. Written informed consent for participation from all participants was obtained. Questionnaires were delivered to participant centres and collected two weeks later. Of the original 89 questionnaires distributed to centres, 41 were returned and reported on in this study (46% response rate).

The questionnaire that was distributed to centres gathered information about the centres themselves, the visual art resources available for children, the teaching methods employed by adults and teachers when working in the visual art programme, and individuals' beliefs of adults and teachers about visual art education in general. It is the data from the beliefs section of the questionnaire that is reported in this paper.

Participants were asked to indicate on a five-point scale the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a range of statements. There were nine statements in total reflecting the three orientations towards visual art education that were discussed earlier, rote, child-centred, cognitive. The table below shows the questions numbers and the orientation to which the question corresponded.

**TABLE 1: Belief Statements and their Corresponding Orientation**

Orientation	Question No.
Rote	i, viii, ix
Child-centred	iii, v, vi
Cognitive	ii, iv, vii

The questionnaire was trialed and amended three times prior to data collection. Statements for the questionnaire were designed to measure the extent to which teachers' beliefs about visual art were informed by the rote, child-centred and cognitive orientations towards visual art. The three sets of questions asked of participants were about:

- What they believed a principle purpose of a visual art programme was.
- What they thought teachers should mainly do when working in the visual art area of the programme (i.e. the adult's role).
- What they thought central aspects of visual art programmes that adults should emphasise should be.

Participants responses to the questions in section three of the questionnaire were collated and examined for trends in responses reflecting the rote, child-centred and cognitive orientations.

## **Results and Discussion**

The results are described in three sections. The first section reports data reflecting beliefs about the principle purpose of visual art. The second section

reports responses to questions about what the adult emphasis in visual art should be. The third section reports responses to questions about central aspects of visual art programmes for young children.

### The Principle Purpose(s) of Visual Art Education Programmes

The participants were in strong disagreement with the statement that suggested broad programme themes or foci should be a principle purpose of visual art programmes in early childhood centres (n=30/41). Most respondents (n=39/41) indicated support for the principle purpose of visual art programmes to be to allow opportunities for creative expression with minimal adult direction. When asked about a principle purpose of visual art being for children to develop artistic skill and understandings of art participants responded with much less polarity. Eighteen respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, 13 disagreed, one did not respond and nine of the respondents responded that they didn't know if they agreed or disagreed with this statement. There was clear agreement with the statement reflecting the child-centred orientation whereas little agreement was found for the statement supporting a rote perspective on visual art education. The statement relating to the cognitive notion of a principle purpose of art being to support children's artistic development met with a fairly even spread of responses, from agree to strongly disagree. This was the only time this trend was seen in the data.

### The Adult's Role

The second set of questions in this section of the questionnaire asked participants to respond to questions about the adult's role in relation to visual art programmes in early childhood centres. When presented with a statement reflecting the cognitive orientation that asked about adults teaching children about the artistic elements of their work, participants responded to this statement with disagreement or strong disagreement (n = 30/41). Conversely when respondents were presented with a statement that focused on positive attention, encouragement, creativity and enjoyment of the process of creation they indicated agreement or strong agreement with the statement (n = 41). Again, nearly all participants responded with strong disagreement or disagreement to the question reflecting in the rote orientation. The notion of "correctness" is incorporated into the statement and was clearly not a favoured approach. The data showed a trend towards agreement with child-centred ideals.

### Central Aspects of Visual Art Programmes

The third and final set of questions asked participants what teachers should place emphasis upon when working in the visual art area of the centre programme.

Most participants (n = 30) did not think that teachers' emphasis should be placed on participation in experiences in visual art that related to art history, criticism and aesthetics. But nearly all of the participants (n = 39) considered that teachers should place emphasis on participation in activities which allow children to engage in the process of creative expression within the art programme. They also tended to not support the statement that teachers should place emphasis on the completion of specific art activities related to programme themes or foci (n = 35). Once more the data revealed more agreement towards child-centred beliefs than those which were reflective of the rote or cognitive orientations.

## **Discussion**

The responses reported above reflected a tendency for teachers to possess beliefs about visual art that were very much aligned with a child-centred orientation. Strong agreement for child-centred perspectives on the purpose of visual art, child-centred beliefs about appropriate teacher / adult roles in relation to visual art, and a child-centred emphasis on aspects of visual art programmes that encourage creativity, expression and experimentation have been seen in the analysis of the questionnaire used in this study.

Throughout the middle and end of the twentieth century teachers were given very clear messages that they were not to become involved in children's artistic endeavours. For instance Lowenfield in 1947 told teachers that the desired outcome of visual art education was "creative and mental growth". Teachers were guided by the central notion that "any application of an external standard, whether of technique or form, immediately induces inhibitions and frustrates the whole aim" (p.12). Lowenfield was one of the first to clearly promote the notion of "teacher guide" - a provider of experiences and environment, and a watcher of children's innate creative expression. The direction in which teachers were guided by such theory of the time was towards non-intervention. It can be seen that this guidance is still informing the beliefs of teachers of young children today.

The child-centred approach to education highlighted the unique abilities of young learners and was instrumental in "reinforcing the common (and convenient) belief that artistic development takes care of itself" (Kindler, 1995, p.11). We have generations of young children and adults who seldom engage in opportunities to talk about, critique and reflect upon their representation of their worlds through their visual art products with their teachers. There are also many teachers who have been provided with little direction as to what they can expect to contribute to this aspect of children's learning and development.

The results from this questionnaire show little agreement for either a rote or cognitively oriented approach towards visual art education. It is certainly the child study movement and child-centred ideals that provoked the movement of teachers' beliefs about young children's learning away from the carefully instructed and structured practices of the early part of the twentieth century. However, as the twenty-first century gets underway the non-interventionist approach towards visual art education is being met with challenge.

In a climate of change in thinking about young children's learning and development from the stage-developmental views through to the social learning perspectives, teaching practice and teachers' beliefs and theory about optimum learning environments for young children must too evolve. If young children are to be faced with opportunities to represent their knowledge through visual art media, we assume as teachers that they possess the skills, knowledge and understandings to use the media to construct their representations, is this however enough?

Is it reasonable for teachers to continue to focus energy on presenting visual art programme areas for children and leaving them to experiment, explore, and express without assisting, provoking, scaffolding children's visual art experiences? Is it reasonable to accept that children's artistic development takes care of itself when in other domains of children's development teachers play an active role in planning learning experiences to challenge children's competence? The cognitive orientation towards visual art suggests not.

The discipline based idea of children's right to education in and about art education through the sub-disciplines received little acceptance in this sample of teachers. Children however require the ability to talk about, reflect upon and produce art if they are thought to be using it as a tool for communication as cognitive theory would suggest. Through careful scaffolding and appropriate intervention early childhood teachers are in a position to assist children to work at the edge of their competence in this domain of their development.

The DBAE model provides a picture of what early childhood visual art programmes potentially could be comprised. Simply, visual art programmes built upon the notion of extending children's artistic development in the domain are the potential for early childhood centre programmes. If children are skilled in the tools of the discipline they are able to use these to communicate their understandings of the world, their perspectives on their lives, their responses to the environment. Teachers of young children need to believe that this is possible and that they as skilled partners in children's learning experiences can support this process. Herein lies the challenge for the future.

## **Limitations**

This study is limited in several ways. The sample is very small however it represents teachers' beliefs from a range of early childhood centre services. Although triangulation of data occurred in other areas of the larger study, the 'beliefs' data were not subjected to this process. It would have been optimal to have returned to the respondents with the data and discussed the trends in responses on a much deeper level. This would have lent the possibility for a substantive interpretive analysis of teachers' beliefs in this discipline. While every effort was taken in the planning and design of the questionnaire there remain issues concerning the clarity of the philosophical statements. The use of discipline specific language in parts of the questionnaire may have made the statements less accessible to the respondents.

## **Conclusion**

This study revealed some aspects of teachers' beliefs in regards to visual art education in the early childhood centre setting. It seems that the child-centred perspective on visual art education provides the basis for informing early childhood teacher's beliefs and their perceptions on what contributes to a successful early childhood visual art programme. The findings provide a challenge to the custom and practice of early childhood visual art programmes, questioning the non-interventionist practices of people working with children in centres in the light of a cognitive perspective on children's artistry and visual art experience.

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