

Early childhood: Learning through visual art

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Like free play, children learn through exploring and experimenting with art media. Terreni (2010) states that art is “often identified as a distinct area of play” (p. 2), and by engaging in and with different arts during early childhood, this will not only influence the achievement of present learning outcomes but also enable behaviours and attitudes that will support future learning in infants, toddlers and young children (Vecchi, 2010; Barton, 2015). Learning and partaking in the arts, whether in dance, music, drama or visual art, fosters a child’s holistic development while cultivating their artistic abilities and knowledge.

In an early childhood setting, educators must acknowledge that arts education is a site for creativity, where children can explore their identities and understandings of the world while continuously advancing their holistic development (Grierson, 2011). Arts education should ultimately promote the growth of infants, toddlers and young children’s holistic development, encouraging their learning and aesthetic appreciation in a free-play artistic environment with guided support if necessary, using culturally appropriate activities that capture and maintain their interest. Essentially, arts education should be an exciting, relaxing and enjoyable subject where children can develop, learn and grow in their artistic potential.

Arts education provides infants, toddlers and young children artistic opportunities that encourage their learning while also contributing and advancing their holistic development. The arts are an important building block in the early years as it supports the development of a child in a number of ways, furthering their cognitive, social, problem solving and personal competencies, as well as their physical, verbal and emotional development (Danko-McGhee & Slutsky, 2007; Barton, 2015; Duh, 2016). Therefore, arts education and activities must be beneficial to infants, toddlers and young children in a variety of ways; influencing and increasing their cognitive, physical, social and emotional skills simultaneously. Giving children a range of artistic experiences and opportunities is essential as arts education is a primary resource for their overall learning and development (Burrill, 2005; Duh, 2016).

In early childhood, infants are constantly growing and increasing their skills, constructing ideas of how things work, with toddlers rapidly developing their physical, social, cognitive and language capabilities (Schwarz & Luckenbill, 2012; Ministry of Education, 2017). Participating in developmentally appropriate activities will increase their holistic skills that will be advantageous to them in later learning.

Young children are also growing in confidence with everyday experiences such as oral language, having new capabilities for developing knowledge, symbolism and representation, and should be offered artistic opportunities that will advance and consequently benefit their holistic development and learning skills (MoE, 2017). Therefore, knowledge of child development is imperative when teaching arts education as educators must be consciously aware of how children can be further encouraged in their holistic development. In the visual arts, toddlers and young children develop their fine motor skills in conjunction with cognitive thinking and expression. With toddlers and young children, their markings (scribbles) mean something to them as they make cognitive connections between these marks and known objects, while an infant’s scribbles are more about the sensory experience in producing them, increasing their physical skills but still constantly developing their thought processes (Bhroin, 2007; Richards, 2007).

Language development can also be explored and stimulated in participating in the visual arts through teachers engaging an individual child, encouraging the use and exploring new vocabulary related to their art in discussion,

providing them with a way to use language meaningfully (Chang & Cress, 2014; Danko-McGhee & Slutsky, 2007). Arts education plays an increasingly important role in early childhood, and the purpose of arts education is not only to encourage the overall development but to also provide adequate and developmentally appropriate opportunities that will continue to boost a child's holistic development and learning. Based on the concept of arts play, it is important to allow infants, toddlers and young children the freedom and unrestrained enjoyment of experimenting and exploring within the arts.

The same characteristics found in the state of play are also apparent when being creative (Burrill, 2005). It is apparent how significant it is to give children the freedom to independently discover, explore, imagine and experiment when learning within the arts. Moreover, they will be consciously or subconsciously developing their cognitive, social and emotional thoughts and feelings about their art experiences.

In visual art activities, young children will access and utilise art media as a way to communicate and connect to the world, independently building upon their knowledge and constructing their own theories about everything (Knight, 2009). However, especially in visual arts education, educators can sometimes place more importance on art media and technique, with teachers consequently limiting and hindering a child's creativity processes with adult-imposed goals or agendas (Plows, 2014; Vecchi, 2010; McWilliams, Brailsford Vaughns, O'Hara, Novotny & Kyle, 2014). Parent, educator or school-based achievement learning agendas in the arts must be discouraged. Lind (2005) and Knight (2009) discuss rhizomatic space and process where children have an "ungoverned opportunity to connect freely with components and concepts" (Knight, 2009, p. 13), ceaselessly establishing connections that are not ruled by a definite plan (Lind, 2005). Restricting a child's exploration and experimentation or pre-determining their learning path and development in the arts does not facilitate encouraging their imagination and creativity, as if their rhizo thinking and space is confined. It prevents conceptual connections being made across cognitive boundaries, obstructing the "endless possibilities for approaching any thought, activity or concept" (Sellers, 2010, p. 560).

When participating in the arts, toddlers and children should be able to freely discover and explore materials and resources, fostering motivation to create something using their imagination and ideas. This will also allow them to express how they feel about the world, encouraging their holistic development and learning (Terreni, 2010; Grierson, 2011). When young children partake in art opportunities that allow for freedom, experimentation, and exploration in a no-failure environment, they will not become bored, stressed or passive as the atmosphere is relaxed and allows for creativity and free expression, similar to when they are free-playing.

Even with infants, parents and kaiakos can give them opportunities for exploration in the arts, as even though they are young, they are still developing rudimentary theories of the world through hands-on play (Schwarz & Luckenbill, 2012; MoE, 2017). By offering children art experiences that do not have definite structure and exact learning or goal objectives, allowing for individual or collaborative creativity, teachers can encourage the use of a variety of art media that doesn't negatively influence a child's creative development or expression (Terreni, 2010; Fuemana-Foa'i, Pohio & Terreni, 2009; Novakovic, 2015). This will motivate infants, toddlers and young children to independently explore and become involved in participating in the arts, not confined by pre-conceptual boundaries of how art in early childhood should be learned and taught.

A fundamental purpose of arts education is to inspire, instruct and support knowledge and interest in the arts, not impede it. Children's creativity in the arts leads to "inspiring and inspired teaching which, in turn, motivates students to learn" (Gibbs, 2005, p. 2). This encourages educators in their role during a child's artistic journey. Therefore, guided participation and scaffolding are essential factors to ensure children maintain an interest in learning the arts. If art opportunities are too challenging for infants, toddlers or young children, they will lose interest, potentially affecting their attitude towards participating in future projects especially in visual arts. Educators in an early childhood context

should be available to offer assistance to a child concerning their artwork on an as-needed basis as visual arts are a significant tool in supporting a child's development (Terreni, 2010; van Kuyk, 2011).

Guided participation and scaffolding both offer assistance in learning the arts, yet scaffolding will most likely benefit young children more. Their emerging independence combined with their increasing curiosity in exploring and experimenting with a variety of materials, their developing autonomy in the arts should be encouraged (MoE, 2017). Producing art is a way to make sense of their worlds, guided participation during art opportunities with infants and toddlers will still allow them to take the lead in artistic experimentation but mentors can still be actively encouraging and initiating learning experiences when necessary (McWilliams et al., 2014; MoE, 2017). Plows (2014) noted that "guided participation fosters the realisation of children's artistic potential" (p. 47) and through scaffolding a teacher can help the child reach a higher level of development in their arts (van Kuyk, 2011). In arts play with infants, toddlers and young children, if a child is without some guided participation, they may become unresponsive and passive in their art experiences and to other art. As the purpose of arts education is to encourage motivation and interest in the arts, educators must provide appropriate instruction when necessary (Veale, 1992). Although, in learning the arts, toddlers should be encouraged to work unattended, developing their skills at their own rate and asking for assistance if needed. Infants should also be provided opportunities that challenge the familiarities in their life, encouraging them towards trying new things (MoE, 2017). Furthermore, in arts education, educators should research children's interests to help them expand on their explorations with guided support, furthering their potential in their arts journey (Helm & Benke, 2003, as cited in Danko-McGhee, 2007).

Young children are becoming comfortable enough in their learning to risk failure and try again, therefore art opportunities can be provided where a teacher offers little or no scaffolding at all, more so observing how a child approaches and learns from their work. Although many early childhood teachers do not have sufficient knowledge and training in how to teach arts and lack confidence in planning their art activities for young children, art opportunities that are designed to engage the children's interests, allowing free range for experimentation, will capture and maintain their attention, inevitably building upon their learning, and the teacher can be free to give basic instruction if needed (Bae, 2003, as cited in Mages, 2016). It is essential in early childhood that the purpose of arts education is to assist children in increasing their artistic capabilities when and if required, offering appropriate assistance that will not interfere or obstruct their natural development but give them a helping hand that will aid and subsequently benefit their learning of the arts.

The purpose of arts education is to capture and maintain interest in learning, and therefore a child's funds of knowledge - relevant prior knowledge - must be considered when setting up appropriate art activities so that they will connect to the child's culture and experiences, allowing them to use their imagination in these artistic play opportunities to explore their culture and identity (Richards, 2009; Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2013; MoE, 2017).

Reflecting on personal experiences in an early childhood context, I observed that if activities are connected to a child's interests and they can identify with a topic, they will be more likely to engage with the materials (Richards, 2009; Fler, 2012). Children may not be interested in art opportunities that have little or no relevance to them as, even if the activities are engaging, pursuing them may seem pointless if positive associations to their lives cannot be made.

Art experiences play a vital role in the development of a child, with artistic thinking providing a particular way of conceiving reality, and therefore, similar to how children construct knowledge in play, their artistic learning and activities need to make sense to them, embedded in their own experiences (Vecchi, 2010; May, 2013; Barton, 2015). Arts education should encourage participation through culturally appropriate opportunities, further increasing holistic development and artistic learning.

Culture influences thoughts and behaviours, regarded not only in terms of ethnic or racial diversity, but also other dimensions such as religion, geographical location and socio-economic status (Bradley & Kibera, 2006). Chen-Hafteck (2007) cited “culture has a strong influence on child development” (p. 141) and as young children give meaning to objects, images, events and people as representations of their culture, their visual arts education should be considerate of their cultural heritage (Lind, 2005). In teaching the arts, educators should be mindful of the different cultural associations each child has so they may benefit from art opportunities. Childhood can be seen as a “social construction within a cultural-historical context” (Graue & Walsh, as cited in Richards, 2007, p. 23) therefore a child’s context must be acknowledged as learning occurs through social, cultural and historical influences (Plows, 2014). Infants and toddlers require and find reassurance in the familiar, therefore culturally recognisable art activities that connect to their funds of knowledge will engage their interest, hence benefiting their artistic learning (MoE, 2017).

In regards to ethnic culture, local culture must also be considered, and educators can provide children opportunities to view and experience objects and artefacts valued by the cultures of the community so they can become familiar with them (Terreni, 2010; Plows, 2014). Visual art is a way for children to connect, identify and construct their cultural identities through learning and activities that relate to their interests and experiences, further encouraging their development and participation in art (Fuemana-Foa’i et al., 2009; Grierson, 2011). By recognising an individual’s funds of knowledge, artistic development and learning can be influenced thus promoted. When teaching arts education, children’s cultural identities must be well represented in art opportunities, as learning through and in the arts is particularly important “given the ways in which children understand and make meaning of the world around them” (Barton, 2015, p. 63; Fuemana-Foa’i et al., 2009).

Fostering aesthetic appreciation in the arts is essential when encouraging holistic development and learning of the arts. Children must know what they consider aesthetically pleasing (whether in sight, sound or movement) for them to appreciate, maintain interest, and thus also aim to achieve further in their own artistic journey.

Arts education should encourage and instruct aesthetic appreciation as it further promotes a child’s holistic development and learning in the arts as it cultivates personal concepts of what they consider and define ‘pleasing’ art. More so, instruction and development of aesthetic appreciation encourages individual pride and satisfaction in personal artwork as well as supporting what a child considers aesthetically pleasing.

Bhroin (2007) notes that the art of young children has intense meaning to them, therefore in an early childhood context educators must embolden a sense of aesthetic appreciation in a child towards their personal work, encouraging them to examine and critique their art, increasing their critical thinking and reflection skills. As toddlers and young children will have many opportunities to observe the work of others, they must not be discouraged in their own work with feelings of comparison. Kindler (as cited in Richards, 2007) believed that there were many myths concerning child development and creativity, one myth being the art processes are more important than the outcomes. However, in visual art, when toddlers and young children create a piece that is meaningful to them and which they find aesthetically pleasing, they do not want to discard or disregard it but possessively hold on to it for individual purposes, such as showing their parents. Therefore, educators have an important role in guiding art opportunities to further encourage a child’s aesthetic appreciation, locating art that captures their interest such as visiting and observing artworks in a museum, finding pleasing music pieces, or attending a play the class can watch (Plows, 2014; Novakovic, 2015; Duh, 2016).

Through observation, a child can reflect on what they consider aesthetically pleasing and these reflections will hopefully positively influence their own artistic journey through inspiration. In supporting their developing aesthetic appreciation and openness to new ideas, toddlers and young children benefit from this for when they begin to recognise what art is aesthetically pleasing to them, they will discuss their thoughts while also critically reflect upon

their observations, using this art to inform their current and future work (MoE, 2004; Duh, 2016; Plows, 2014). Infants are too young to be instructed in aesthetic appreciation, however, encouraging and instructing aesthetic appreciation in toddlers and young children will inspire their work, and therefore continue to cultivate and further their holistic development and learning in the arts.

Like free-play, children must have the freedom to explore and experiment within the arts, whether dance, music, drama or visual art. Furthermore, as infants, toddlers and young children are all in different developmental periods, the arts provide each stage the opportunity to further their holistic development and learning of the arts while also encouraging their individuality. Arts education should promote holistic development in a culturally sensitive and exploratory environment, giving guided support if needed while also discovering and fostering on what a child finds aesthetically pleasing. Participating in the arts plays a crucial role in the way a child makes sense of their environment, their world, and ultimately, themselves.

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