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How Young Children Come to Value and Engage in the Visual Arts: Examining the Impact of Bi-Directional Interactions on Children as Imaginative Visual Researchers

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Abstract
This study examined the contextual factors that shape how young children come to value and use the visual arts in their learning. The research sought to understand more deeply, the impact of visual arts practices that are informed by sociocultural theories on children's and their family's perceptions and engagement with the visual arts in their learning. Recognising the profound impact of bidirectional relationships in the early years (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), this interpretive qualitative research focused on the interactions between children, teachers, and families at three early childhood settings and at six children's homes in Auckland, New Zealand. The theoretical framework and study design were underpinned by sociocultural theories, bioecological theories, and by narrative inquiry. Participatory arts-based methods were fundamental as they allowed the research participants to play significant roles in telling their stories through textual and visual means. Through multi-layered analysis, a complex web of influences shaping how children engage in the visual arts emerged. A key finding was the impact of bi-directional interactions within settings and between settings. The teachers in this study wove together rich, contextualised visual arts curricula and actively engaged with children through the visual arts. They prioritised disseminating the value of these practices to their educational communities. As a result, parents recognised how visual arts can enrich and support their child's learning. Teachers who actively role modelled enjoyment and expertise in the visual arts were a particularly potent influence. These findings demonstrate that developing shared values between settings in the microsystem can enrich children's capacity to become imaginative visual researchers.

Keywords Early childhood education · Visual arts · Visual arts pedagogies · Sociocultural theories · Bioecological theories

Introduction

Young children actively seek to make connections. The visual arts are a powerful conduit through which they can explore, experiment, communicate, and collaborate with others as they make sense of their worlds (Brooks, 2017; Vecchi, 2010). It is during the early years that children are initiated into the visual arts. These formative experiences can have a lasting effect on how children develop images of themselves as art makers and can impact the degree to which the visual arts play a part in their lives as they mature (Veale, 2000). One of the most profound influences on how children experience the visual arts are the bidirectional interactions that occur through their everyday lives, in particular, with their families, teachers, and peers. Through these interactions, children become familiar with the cultural tools including those related to the visual arts that are valued by their cultures, communities, and educational settings (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). What is concerning, then, are the persistent discourses that fail to recognise the potential that the visual arts hold in supporting young children's learning (Lindsay, 2017).

What is determined as meaningful visual arts pedagogy in early years education has long been a source of debate with some teachers continuing to advocate for a hands-off approach and others adopting increasingly teacher-directed approaches (Cutcher & Boyd, 2018; Lindsay, 2017). Both these approaches fail to position children as agentic contributors to the learning relationship. Since the conception of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), children's rights to actively participate in

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their learning has become an increasing concern for some educationalists (de Sousa et al., 2019; Waller & Bitou, 2011). In line with this position, a third group of teachers, influenced by sociocultural theories, have developed visual arts pedagogies that reside between these two positions. The stories of these practices, however, are not always easy to access.

In response, this study sought to provide an in-depth examination of the contextual influences that shape how young children come to value and use the visual arts in their learning across the contexts of their early childhood settings and their homes. The study took place in Auckland, New Zealand in three early childhood settings that were selected due to the emphasis they place on the visual arts, and in the homes of six children. The overarching research question was:

> How do bidirectional relationships within early childhood settings address the contextual influences on how visual arts affect the education and lives of young children?

In New Zealand, one of the strengths of the early childhood curriculum document, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) is how its framework makes space for differing values about childhood, teaching, and learning, meaning that the curriculum is woven together based on the context it operates in. The three participating settings reflect this notion. Differing values about the visual arts, conceptions of childhood, knowledge, and learning informed the unique, localised curriculum each setting constructed.

This paper examines the impact of bi-directional interactions both within settings and between settings in influencing children's engagement in the visual arts and their developing artistic identities. This finding is presented through the narratives of four of the children involved in this study who were key participants; twins, Ellie and Sydney, Rose, and Finn (all four years old). The implications for early childhood settings, early years education and beyond conclude the paper.

Key Discourses and Issues that Informed the Research

Existing research reveals a tangle of competing discourses surrounding how the visual arts are understood, valued, and taught in early childhood. Kindler (1996) argues four key factors shape how visual arts education is perceived; 'truths', policy, personal experiences of the arts and research. Foucault (2003) considers a 'truth' to be a societal level discourse that is predominantly believed to be true. In terms of the visual arts, McClure (2011) asserts that "still-dominant discourses of optimisation, such as child development, individualism, expression, creativity, and visual realism exert limiting pressures on understandings of the art and visual culture that children consume and create" (p. 128). She argues a particularly persistent myth is the belief that all children are innately creative, the consequence being they do not need to be taught. McArdle (2008) believes that the modernist and postmodernist art movements were instrumental in establishing this notion, as they challenged beliefs about what was art and who could be deemed an artist. Lindsay's (2018) recent research revealed this discourse continues to pervade. She discovered teachers with little content knowledge or confidence in the arts were more likely to align their practices with such macrolevel truths.

A second macrolevel influence effecting how early childhood visual arts education is perceived is the political and economic climate. The early childhood sector in New Zealand had undergone a number of transformative changes since the 1980's. Although the publication of the early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) with its principles of "equity, empowerment, community engagement and holistic development" (Te One, 2013, p. 23) allowed for the normalisation of sociocultural theories, since the turn of the century changes in governance at a national level have resulted in an increasing climate of compliance (Haggerty & Alcock, 2016). The government's emphasis on increasing participation resulted in an increase of new centres (Everiss et al., 2017). Whilst all centres in New Zealand receive funding, most charge additional fees. Centres in communities that cannot absorb additional costs are therefore less well-resourced. The 2010 governmental decision to relinquish an earlier goal of achieving 100% qualified early childhood staff was also concerning due to Lindsay's argument that reduced numbers of qualified staff limits the potential for the visual arts to play a meaningful role in curricula. The current government's view of early childhood education as 'preparation for school', and the belief that increased competency in literacy and numeracy is key in impacting future educational outcomes has decreased emphasis on other curriculum areas (Azzam, 2009).

Compounding these macrolevel issues are competing discourses about the purpose of visual arts education in the early years and contrasting views about the role of the teacher (McArdle, 2012; Richards & Terreni, 2013). Debate around these issues, initiated by Eisner in 1973, has now spanned five decades. Kelly and Jurisich (2010) argue that despite increased exposure to sociocultural theories, a developmentalist 'hands-off' approach which disregards the contextual nature of knowledge construction, continues to prevail. Lindsay (2018) has identified another disquieting trend where teachers, who may lack confidence or pedagogical knowledge to teach the arts, have returned to more teacher directed approaches, inspired by a proliferation of websites such as Pinterest that offer a myriad of prefabricated art

projects. This recent development highlights the important connection between personal identity and teacher identity. Teachers who have not had access to the arts within their own education, or, who recall negative memories of engaging in the arts, can avoid further learning in this domain (Kenny et al., 2015). This is concerning as young children are increasingly exposed to visual and multimodal texts (Richards, 2011) and therefore, require curriculum that allows them to learn how visual texts are constructed as well as how to create their own (McArdle, 2012). Although some early childhood teachers have developed pedagogical approaches to teaching the visual arts that are influenced by sociocultural theories resulting in children being actively taught about visual arts whilst retaining their agency, little qualitative research has explored these practices (Lindsay, 2017).

The perspectives of families and children on the visual arts in their lives and learning is a further area that has been under-researched in New Zealand. The marginalisation of children and parents' perspectives in this area, coupled with the emphasis that sociocultural and bioecological theories place on contextual and cultural knowledge, were therefore, significant influences on the study design.

Theoretical Framework

Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017), the New Zealand early childhood curriculum is strongly informed by both sociocultural and bioecological theories. These theories position children as embedded in their social, cultural and historical contexts. Children are recognised for the prior knowledge they have developed through their social interactions and experiences (Richards & Terreni, 2013). In this paradigm, knowledge is understood as subjective and contextualised. These theories challenged the theories of universal development that previously dominated the early childhood sector and have had significant implications for the role of the teacher who shifts from a position of holding all the knowledge to one where children are recognised for their contributions to learning and their unique cultural and individual identities (Knight, 2008).

Sociocultural Theories

The seminal work of Vygotsky (1962) argues that context has a profound influence on development. Vygotsky emphasises the social aspect of development whereby external interactions on an intrapersonal level are later internalised. He proposes this process is mediated by psychological and technical tools.[1] Language, according to Vygotsky, is a key cultural tool due to the way it aids transformation of understanding through the process of articulating thinking in a social context. Although most interpretations of this aspect of Vygotsky's theories have focused on spoken and written language, others such as Wertsch (1985) and John-Steiner (1995) have widened their interpretations to consider a range of culturally valued domains that have the capacity to support the process of communicating, recalling and reconstructing experience within a social context. The research of Brooks (2017) which builds on these theories, is particularly significant. She argues that drawing is a particularly potent tool due to its tangible nature in supporting young children to construct knowledge with others. Drawing, she contends, aids communication and collaboration, and promotes higher mental functions. Higher mental functions allow young children to become independent learners as they develop the metacognitive capability to make choices about which tools will support their learning (Bodrova & Leong, 2007).

An aspect of Vygotsky's work that has strongly influenced the early childhood sector as been the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Vygotsky (1978) describes this as the distance between the current level of development and the level that can be achieved with the guidance of a knowledgeable other. This theory has since been interpreted in conversely different ways, for example, scaffolding and co-construction. Scaffolding, conceptualised by Bruner (1962), has been critiqued for his emphasis on the adult's knowledge who gradually relinquishes control; meaning the adult remains in a position of power. In contrast, co-construction positions the child as a key participant in their own learning (Hedges & Cooper, 2018; Jordan, 2009). In co-construction, the teacher's role is far more complex due to the need to understand the child's prior knowledge, dispositions, and culture as a basis for planning for learning. Taking on a co-constructivist approach has been argued to better address knowledge-power issues by allowing both teacher and child agency as art-makers. All these interpretations recognise the integral roles relationships and thus, teachers, play in the learning process and highlight how different interpretations of theory can result in conversely different approaches to pedagogy.

Bioecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bioecological systems theory positions learning as interactional and holistic in nature. The child is positioned, embedded in a system of influences that each impact development in varying degrees. This theory,

[1] Psychological tools help to guide children's thinking and actions and technical tools enable them to transform materials (Miller, 2011).

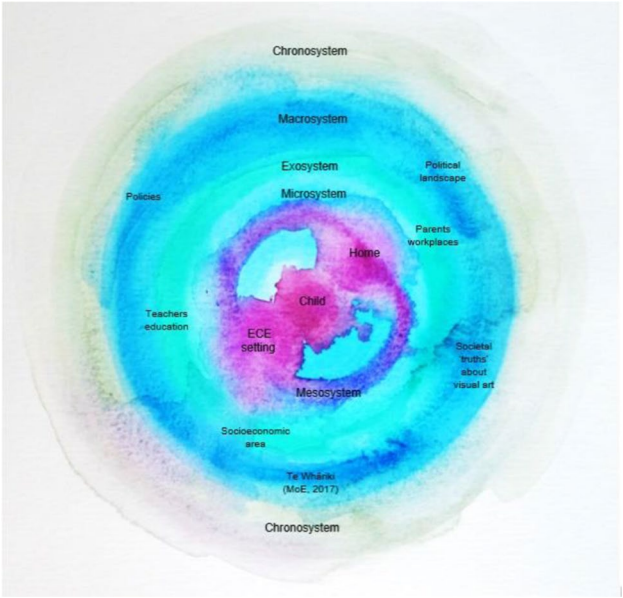

Fig. 1 Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory reconceptualised

similarly, to sociocultural theories, highlights the influence of the relationships between the historical, political, and social landscape the child resides in. A key aspect of this theory is how it focuses on the bidirectional interactions that occur between systems and inside of systems, rather than focusing on the influence of a single layer.

Although all five systems were examined, this study took place primarily in the microsystems and mesosystems of the children who participated. Härkönen (2007) asserts that interactions in these spaces are the most influential for children. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) characterise bidirectional interactions, also known as proximal processes as the "engines of development" (p. 798). These don't simply 'happen' to the child, but in alignment with notions of co-construction, the child is also recognised for the impact they have on their environment. The decision to examine mesosystem interactions was informed by Bronfenbrenner's (1994) claim that consistency between the values across settings can impact positively on development. In order to emphasise the role the child plays in influencing and adapting cultural processes, I reconceptualised Bronfenbrenner's original model to emphasise the bi-directional and complex nature of the proximal processes that are encapsulated by this theory (Fig. 1).

Methodology, Methods, and Analysis

The research was positioned in a qualitative interpretivist paradigm. This position acknowledges that knowledge is subjective and socially constructed. Chilisa and Kawulich (2012) argue that research that seeks multiple subjectivities has the potential to challenge dominant discourses and fracture macrolevel 'truths'. My chosen methodological framework of narrative inquiry was positioned inside an ethnographic space. Ethnography, in which the researcher immerses themselves within the research setting, seeks to generate meanings through the process of 'living' in that place. Narrative inquiry is one means of perceiving and theorising human experiences both at micro and macro levels (Richardson, 2002). In terms of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theories, Bradbury (2017) argues narrative inquiry can support connections to be made between levels making visible the complex web of relationships that exist between people, environments, culture, education, language and families.

Based on these ideas, a cross contextual approach was applied to enable the examination of bi-directional interactions and mesosystem exchanges. Three early childhood settings in Auckland, New Zealand were purposively selected. At each setting, the teachers working with the oldest group of children, the oldest group of children (mainly 4 year olds), and their parents/caregivers were invited to participate in the research. Each setting and participant was given a pseudonym. Families were invited to indicate their interest in participating in a second phase of the research at the conclusion of an online questionnaire (discussed in data collection methods). Two children at each setting were selected, in consultation with their teachers, to participate in this phase. These participants are referred to by their first names.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection methods derived from both narrative inquiry and arts-based methods were selected for their potential to assist in learning about the wider social, historical, and political influences that impacted each setting. The inclusion of creative participatory methods allowed the research participants to engage in what Springgay (2002) describes as 'living inquiry' as they explored their relationship with the visual arts by creating visual and textual field texts. This approach allowed participants to "claim expertise about their own lives" (Webber, 2019, p. 121).

Phase one of the research took place in each early childhood setting, in the classroom catering to the oldest group of children (mainly 3 to 4-year olds). During this stage key documents, including philosophy statements and pedagogical documentation were thematically analysed (Bowen, 2009). My analysis focused on identifying repeated themes

pertaining to the values about learning, children, the visual arts, and visual arts pedagogy. Classroom observations were conducted 1 day a week over a period of 8 weeks in each setting. The focus of these was to record interactions between children, their environment, materials, and the proximal processes occurring between their teachers, families, and peers as they created visual arts (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). These interactions were recorded through digital recordings, photographs, and notes in my research journal. I chose to focus on assemblage of the visual cultural tools valued by each learning community rather than focusing on a single medium or visual arts practice.

The teachers at each setting were given reflective art journals. They were invited to use these to reflect on their own visual histories and current practices through creating and finding images and writing reflections. At the end of this phase, a group conversation took place with each teaching team and an online questionnaire was made available for parents and caregivers. The questionnaire focused on parents' perceptions of the visual arts in their child's life and how these were valued by families and integrated into their experiences (see Appendix A).

A second phase took place in five homes of children (six children in total) attending these settings. Children and their parents were given digital cameras for a period of 3 weeks and were invited to record visual experiences they deemed significant. Later, a conversation centred around these images took place in either the child's home or at their early childhood setting.

Data Analysis

The creative nature of the data meant this material initially drove analysis. Interim research texts were composed in order to examine the temporal, social, and place dimensions of the data (Clandinin, 2014). The process of writing and re-storying allowed meanings to be theorised through the application of reflective and theoretical lenses in terms of the research paradigm and questions (Creswell, 2019). Informed by bioecological theories, I sought connections between macrolevel contextual influences and the microlevel narratives I had collected. The analysis of visual data was informed by Collier's (2001) four phases of analysis which include listing the visual data as a whole, categorising and sorting images, the application of research questions, and a final phase in which emergent themes and findings were further examined. In addition, visual narratives were composed throughout this stage, supporting both the analysis of visual and textual materials. Bradbury (2017) asserts that the creation of visual narratives can aid researchers to form connections between, and meanings from "ostensibly jumbled, chaotic, incoherent talk of events and feelings that are not amenable to the conventional order and directionality of narrative structure" (p. 16). This process supported the analysis of the textual data, and vice versa. Re-storying was not only a method of analysis but was the primary means of reporting the research. Reconfiguring multiple narratives allowed elements of data to be pieced together. Inclusion of the visual narratives presented as sequences further served to contextualise the stories of individuals, making visible the complex web of interrelationships between the environment, materials, and proximal processes between participants (Bradbury, 2017).

Stories of Bi-Directional Interactions

This next section presents the impact of bi-directional interactions within settings and between settings. In alignment with the reporting of the initial research project, these findings are examined through the pieced together narratives of three key participants, their parents, and their teachers. These retellings were derived from the classroom observations, teachers' reflective art journals, the group conversation with the teachers, the digital imagery captured by the key participants, and conversation with the key participant families.

Amanta kindergarten–Ellie and Sydney's Story

The physical environment of Amanta evokes the impression of being in a giant studio. Opportunities for creating art are everywhere. The kindergarten employs five teachers, Margaret, Samantha, Maddie, Sally, and Fleur, who all participated in the research. Four-year-old twins, Ellie and Sydney, and their mother, Rebecca were three of the key participants at this setting.

An interesting phenomenon at Amanta is that all five teachers engage in creative practices in their personal lives. In their reflective journals they shared stories of their first encounters with the visual arts and their memories of creative mothers who role modelled enjoyment in artistic endeavours and created permissive environments with free access to a range of materials. Although several of the teachers shared later memories of barriers or challenges faced throughout their educational histories, they had all found ways to maintain their artistic identities. Through years of collegial discourse, they had made the conscious decision to reveal this aspect of themselves in their practice with children. They described their active participation in the visual arts as a 'circle of creativity'. Fleur explained:

> The idea of modelling being a creator and inventor sits within the heart of our learning environment here. We want our children to think outside the square, be problem solvers and develop their ideas and theories through collaboration and consultation with others and

Fig. 2 Spaces, materials and pedagogical documentation at Amanta

> by trying things out. We often refer to this as a "circle of creativity" where teachers work alongside children on an array of projects, where ideas are shared and unpacked.

This manifested itself in several ways; the teachers engage in their own creative projects in the classroom discussing their creative decision making with interested children. They initiate collaborative projects which they believe foster rich dialogue as children co-create with peers and teachers. Finally, they co-create alongside children, role-modelling their own creative process and strategies to solve problems. Margaret explained, "When teachers make mistakes or try out new things themselves this provides great opportunities for children to learn and develop their own problem-solving skills". These practices encapsulate the teaching teams' image of children as 'partners' and 'co-artists'.

Sharing the critical role that the visual arts play in children's learning is another important aspect of their pedagogical approach. They achieve this by hosting events such as an annual art exhibition and through pedagogical documentation which takes the form of self-published books, wall displays, and children's individual portfolio's (Fig. 2). The teachers' practices come to life through the story of Ellie and Sydney.

On arrival at kindergarten each morning, Ellie and Sydney immediately sought to create. I soon discovered they were deeply interested in animals which were the subject of all their artwork. Each day, they explored this interest through a range of different media such as paint, clay, pastel, and recycled materials (Fig. 3). Their teachers supported their interest through active engagement and discussion. For example, one day Fleur played a game where she was required by Ellie and Sydney to 'guess' which animal they were drawing (Fig. 4). Whilst drawing, Sydney changed her mind about the type of animal she was creating. Fleur responded, "I thought you were drawing a racoon? That's what happens with drawing, sometimes your ideas change as you draw and then you end up with something completely different". Later, as Ellie cut pieces of string over her drawing, Fleur added, "If you want to stick that here's a glue stick, but I'm not sure what your idea is yet". This dialogue reflects Fleur's value of articulating creative processes whilst respecting children's decision making. Deans and Brown (2008) assert that such practices create a climate of intersubjectivity where artmaking is valued as both fun and experimental.

After several weeks of using the digital cameras I had provided, I visited Ellie and Sydney at their home. Their mother, Rebecca explained that Ellie and Sydney have constant access to art materials. As I had witnessed at Amanta, they explored their interest in animals constantly through their artmaking. Rebecca holds great value for her daughters' capacity to be imaginative and creative. She views her role as providing opportunity and space for creativity, documenting their work, and organising excursions to visually stimulating environments, such as the art gallery. Both Ellie and Sydney's images revealed not just their preoccupation with animals, but also their deep interest in texture (Fig. 5). Rebecca said:

> The other thing I have noticed is that as adults you stop looking closely at things and seeing the detail, and as kids, they look at things so closely, and all the detail

Fig. 3 Ellie and Sydney create large drawings of a cheetah and a spiders web

Fig. 4 Ellie, Sydney and Fleur play a guessing game

Fig. 5 Textures captured by Ellie (first two images) and Sydney (second two images)

and the textures. One of the main things I have noticed from the photos is how important texture is to them.

Rebecca later emailed a story about the girls going to see a production of 'The lion in the meadow'. She wrote, "The girls absolutely loved it. They got up early next morning

Fig. 6 Interpretations of fur by Ellie and Sydney, captured by Rebecca

Fig. 7 The Te ao toi at Awhero

(while I was still asleep!) and made these pictures of the lion. They obviously wanted to try and replicate the texture" (Fig. 6).

Awhero Community-Based Centre–Rose's Story

Awhero is a small community-based centre. The majority of children at Awhero identify as Māori[2] although some are also of Pasifika[3] heritage. Two teachers, Hannah and Susan chose to participate. Rose, and her mother, Lucy, of Tongan and Samoan heritage were two of the key participants. Awhero is situated in one of the lowest socioeconomic areas of Auckland. The centre's striking architecture, and it's beautiful Te ao toi[4] are therefore, a powerful signal to the wider community of the philosophy aroha (love), manaakitanga (esteem, respect) and awhinatia (caring, sharing, nurturing) at this setting (Fig. 7). The centre's philosophy is grounded in the notion that education has the capacity to change outcomes and that education for Māori must be underpinned by Māori epistemologies and ontologies (Pere, 1982). Children at Awhero are viewed as taonga (treasure). Susan, of Māori decent, is an accomplished weaver. Puketapu-Hetet (2000) posits that the act of weaving connects the weaver with ngā tupuna (ancestors), explaining that Māori are intrinsically connected to both past and future. She believes that a weaver "sees herself as a repository, linking the knowledge of the past with that of the future" (p. 5). Likewise, Susan values the visual arts as a conduit through which children can connect with their ancestry and cultural heritage. The teaching team believes learning is most effective when children have opportunities to learn through interchange and collaboration with their peers, known as tuakana-teina. Susan spoke of gently guiding children through their artwork whilst ensuring they developed a deep sense of self-worth and an understanding of their cultural identity.

Four-year-old Rose is not of Māori decent, and yet her envelopment in this particular microsystem provoked her

[2] Māori are the Tangata whenua (original inhabitants) of New Zealand.

[3] The term 'Pasifika' is unique to New Zealand to describe migrants from the Pacific region who now reside in New Zealand.

[4] Te ao toi directly translates as 'the world of art'. At Awhero this term refers to the large art studio.

Fig. 8 Representing wharenui with the support of Susan

Fig. 9 Rose experiences and represents a wharenui

deep curiosity about wharenui.[5] Her interest was initiated during a collaborative drawing experience where two other children represented their ancestral wharenui which they had recently visited (Fig. 8). As she drew, she and Susan quietly talked:

> Susan: What did you go to the marae for?
> Rose: Mumma was sick.
> Susan: You haven't drawn yourself. Are there people in the marae? Rose points.
> Susan: Are you going to draw a wharekai (kitchen)? Because you don't eat your kai in the whare. You keep going, tell me the story of your marae.

Over the next few weeks, Susan gently nurtured Rose's developing interest, offering her materials to work with, providing opportunities for her to work with peers who had personal experiences of wharenui, and organising an excursion to a local wharenui. As time unfolded, the complexity of Rose's drawings increased extraordinarily (Fig. 9).

Lucy, Rose's mother met me one afternoon at Awhero. She explained that Rose lives with her siblings and cousins in a large and busy household. Because of this, opportunities to engage in artmaking can be challenging. Lucy expressed her gratitude that Rose had so many opportunities to create at Awhero due to her awareness of how Rose uses drawing as a means to process and narrate her experiences. Lucy gave the example of Rose sharing her experience of the trip to the wharenui. Rose had come home and created a drawing to express how important this encounter had been. Lucy

[5] A wharenui is a meeting house.

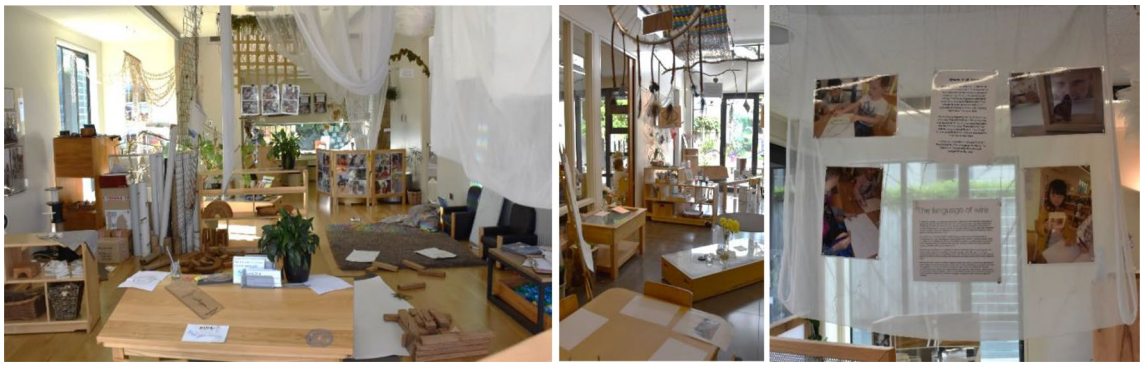

Fig. 10 Classroom space and adjoining atelier at Alfredo

Fig. 11 Finn shares his butterfly book from home and represents his ideas

said: "I love how she drew the marae and she told me this whole huge story from just one drawing. That was really special for me."

Alfredo Early Childhood Centre–Finn's Story

Alfredo is a private early childhood centre, strongly influenced by the pedagogical ideas of Reggio Emilia. This is first reflected through the architectural design which includes a central atelier and atelier in each classroom and through the teacher's thoughtful use of pedagogical documentation as a tool for understanding children's strategies for learning and to make this visible to others in their educational community (Dahlberg, 2012) (Fig. 10). The full time atelierista (arts-specialist), Andrea, and three teachers, Sabrina, Katy, and Ella participated in this research. The key child participants were Finn, and his parents, Shannon and Dylan.

Congruent with the Reggio Emilia approach, the teachers at Alfredo value the visual arts as a vehicle through which children can inquire into their worlds. Children in this setting are valued as theory makers and researchers. Each day, the teachers and children, with the support of Andrea, engage in long term inquiry-based projects. These projects respond to an overarching pedagogical inquiry which provokes the teachers to think critically about their roles in supporting children's learning. They are focusing on how to nurture an ecological future. Andrea's role is critical. Her in-depth understanding of the visual arts from a fine arts perspective allows her to challenge and enrich the teachers' thinking about how the visual arts can be perceived. She prompts them to consider their work from different perspectives and consider alternate interpretations.

In response to the overarching investigation, the children were invited to bring natural treasures from home. This initiative aimed to foster deeper connections between home and school. A fascination with butterflies emerged prompting a series of email exchanges between parents and teachers. The teaching team responded by first establishing the children's existing knowledge of butterflies. The visual arts were utilised to provoke the children to develop and exchange working theories about butterflies (Fig. 11).

Each day, children were reminded of their previous thinking and invited to continue their research through artmaking. On one occasion, Finn excitedly shared his butterfly book from home before representing his ideas. After my observations concluded, Katy shared how this inquiry had evolved. As Autumn approached, the children could no longer find butterflies, provoking the question, "Where had they gone?". They were encouraged to search for solutions. Finn suggested creating a map. Another child theorised they

Fig. 12 Top row: Drawings of a swan plant and 'My little pony' by Finn. Bottom row: A pony castle and pony book, captured by Finn

had gone up a mountain. Finn declared he knew a mountain, across the road from Alfredo. The teaching team honoured these theories and an excursion was organised. Whilst no butterflies were discovered the children discovered a hut. They decided this must be where the butterflies now lived. Back at the centre, Katy encouraged the children to reflect on this experience through artmaking and collaborative discussion. As they drew, the children exchanged ideas about creating their own hut:

> Finn: We need skipping ropes so the butterflies can dry their wings.
> Anna: We need a refrigerator full of leaves.
> Arabella: We need to paint it the same colour as the sky.

The teachers' response reflects their deep respect for children's perceptions and interpretations of reality, in alignment with Rinaldi's (2004) assertion that humans are in constant search of meaning.

When I visited Finn's home, his mother Shannon, explained Finn's interest in butterflies had been initiated when he observed a paper-wasp kill a butterfly on his own swan plant. She observed Finn's interest had evolved into a fascination for all winged creatures. She shared multiple drawings by Finn including images of 'My little ponies'. These images revealed the intricate web of connections and influences that existed between Finn's experiences of both real and imaginary worlds (Fig. 12).

Conclusions and Recommendations

Both sociocultural and bioecological theories highlight the fundamental impact that relationships and contextual influences, for example history, tradition, values, beliefs, cultural tools, and materials, have on the ways in which children become enculturated into the visual arts. The cross contextual nature of this study allowed me to capture this complexity. The narratives shared here reveal that young children have the capacity to inquire into their interests and working theories through the visual arts over sustained periods of time. This was enabled, first, in the early childhood centres who had conceptualised their visual arts curriculum based on a unique image of childhood and in response to the aspirations and values of their wider educational communities.

The teachers in all three centres responded to children's curiosities about their worlds with deep respect, offering materials, actively engaging in their art making, providing opportunities for collaboration with peers, and through providing opportunities for children to conduct their own research. Development through a sociocultural lens is an act of transformation through which social interactions become part of the child's internalised processes (Robbins, 2005). All three teaching teams deeply value relational learning, creating learning occasions daily, where children work collaboratively with their peers and teachers and they become enculturated into using cultural tools valued by their communities as they develop skills and techniques with visual media and strategies to guide their mental processes. During

these occasions, children developed their ability to collaborate, negotiate, compromise, problem solve, and to value the perspectives of others. These practices, and the children's desire to then continue their visual research independently in their homes, affirm Brooks' (2017) assertion that such practices develop higher mental functions and metacognitive capacity.

All three centres recognise the value of disseminating the value of the visual arts in supporting children's learning which they achieve through the way they present the physical environment, their pedagogical documentation and through daily conversations. As such, they work to share values and understandings across these settings due to their understanding that strengthening the mesosystem has the potential to encourage children's development and identities as art-makers. Via these avenues, the teachers managed to dispel some widely accepted myths about children's visual art (McClure, 2011). This is significant because there can be polarising views between parents' expectations of early childhood education and teachers' priorities. In contrast, the parents involved in this research, several of whom proclaimed to have little experience of the visual arts, expounded their understanding of the benefits of visual arts education. Despite the way previous research has identified that policy, the political landscape, and macro level truths about young children's art making can be inhibiting factors on early years visual arts education, at a micro level, the teaching communities in this research had largely alleviated these influences. This finding establishes that educational communities can act as advocates for the visual arts, aligning with Härkönen's (2007) argument that the bidirectional interactions that occur within the microsystem have the most impact and indeed, have the potential to alleviate the potency of external factors.

In the children's homes, children continued their visual investigations in environments where their work was valued and where their parents, in alignment with their teachers' practices, demonstrated deep respect and interest in their artwork and the dialogue that accompanied this. This research makes visible that children have a deep capacity to explore, imagine, and develop their thinking through the visual arts. However, it also reveals the powerful roles that adults play in providing permissive, inspiring, and provocative environments to enable this to occur. In this research, each educational community had achieved this through self-reflection and collegial dialogue. This had enabled them to establish localised images of childhood, a clear philosophy of how the arts were valued in their unique settings, and a commitment to fostering both their pedagogical and practical content knowledge of the visual arts. Dahlberg et al. (2007) contend that working in a sociocultural paradigm can be aided by "commitment to particular values, such as uncertainty, subjectivity, democracy, creativity, curiosity and a desire to experiment and border cross" (p. xii). The practices of each early childhood community encapsulate this notion.

These narratives indicate there is value in teachers weaving their personal artistic identities with their visual arts pedagogies, allowing them to be particularly attuned to children's creative processes and challenges. Such practices foster environments of co-construction and demonstrate a re-examination of "pedagogical control, expectation, response and direction" (Knight, 2008, p. 314).

Recommendations for Practice, Policy and Future Research

A key contextual influence identified in this research was the organisational environment. Each setting had developed organisational cultures that were open to new ideas and invited the exchange of ideas. Early childhood teachers and communities wanting to strengthen their visual arts curriculum and practices could begin by collectively examining epistemological questions about education, childhood, and learning; they could explore the cultural values and aspirations of their communities and then interrogate these in terms of how the visual arts are currently valued in their educational settings. Integral to this process is the development and dissemination of a shared philosophy articulating how the visual arts are valued. This supports this construction of a collective identity and ensures transparency in communicating these values to the whole community.

Educational leaders play key roles in supporting teacher's professional growth. Teachers can be supported to develop both their pedagogical and practical content knowledge of the visual arts through targeted professional development or alternatively, through the development of a culture of knowledge sharing within the educational community where teachers are encouraged to share their narratives and to embrace a position of 'not knowing' as they too become explorers and experimenters. On an individual level, teachers could spend time exploring their personal relationships with the visual arts and making sense of the often contradictory experiences from their own educational histories. This research reveals that children need teachers who are attentive, respectful, open to their interpretations, and who have practical visual arts content knowledge which enables these teachers to become co-constructors and co-creators. Therefore, there is great value in teachers developing the skills and confidence to create and experiment with their own art marking. Teachers who have visual arts expertise can be encouraged to play key roles as advocates for the visual arts through sharing their expertise. Whilst these is great value in employing a full-time visual arts expert, this may not always be viable. Alternatively, early childhood communities could connect with visual arts experts in their communities and invite them

to collaborate on specific projects. They could also make connections with relevant cultural sites, art galleries, and other settings in which art can be experienced. Strengthening mesosystem connections in this way has the potential to both enrich children's experiences of the visual arts as well as to develop teacher's understandings of contemporary art practices.

This research has demonstrated that strengthening the mesosystemic bidirectional interactions between children's homes and educational settings is integral in enabling their visual inquiries to continue for significant periods. Teachers can act as powerful advocates for the visual arts through seeking family's histories, aspirations, and narratives of the visual arts as a basis for supporting children to engage with visual culture and to develop strong identities as art makers. Teachers can also act as advocates for the visual arts within their wider communities through making visible their visual arts curriculum through pedagogical documentation and community events.

At a macro level, emphasising the importance of the visual arts within policy and curriculum documents, and having these prioritised by Ministry of Education assessors of early childhood settings, are strategies through which wider shifts could be achieved. Finally, although this research made visible the unique approaches to visual arts pedagogies and curriculum based on their particularly values and priorities in three early childhood settings, the stories of such practices are not always easy to access. I, therefore, argue that widening the conversation and finding new ways to disseminate the stories of teachers who have developed such practices, coupled with further research in this area, will be crucial in further dispelling macro level truths about young children's art making and the role of the teacher in this domain.

Appendix A

Questionnaire for Parents/Caregivers

How important are the visual arts in your family and culture?

What kinds of visual experiences do your family experience?

What visual arts experiences does your child most enjoy?

What kind of visual art does your child make at home?

How often does your child engage in these activities?

In what ways are you involved in your child's art making?

What role do you think visual art plays in your child's learning?

How important do you think the visual arts are as part of your child's education?

Please describe you your child's early childhood centre values visual arts and how they use them in their programme?

How do you think this impacts your child's learning?

In what ways do you think your child's peers influence you child's ideas about art they want to create or the frequency with which they make visual art?

Is the kind of visual art your child makes at their early childhood centre different to what they create at home? Is so, how?

Declarations

Ethical Approval Particular emphasis was placed on ethical considerations due to the way this research drew heavily on stories of personal lives and involved young children. Approval to conduct the research was granted by The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee (UAHPEC). All participants were issued with participant information sheets and consent forms which outlined the intentions of the research, ways in which the research would be disseminated and the participants rights to voluntarily participate and maintain anonymity (except in the case of the key child participants and their parents, who could consent to be identifiable). All child participants were given assent forms in which children could indicate their decision to participate in the research by circling a smiley face or a neutral face. The assent form helped me establish initial consent. Prosser and Burke (2008) assert that researchers should consider children's assent as 'provisional' and that they must address ethical knots that arise throughout the research in an environment of respectful collaboration. In keeping with this, I responded to children's changing needs and emotions as they arose drawing upon my experience as a qualified early childhood teacher to perceive if a child did not wish to be observed. All data created by research participants (including the teachers reflective journals and the children's and parent's images) remained in the participants possession, and with permission, I created copies of these that were stored securely. In addition, participants were given the opportunity to offer their perspectives on the stories, images and interpretations that were to be included in the final reporting of the research.

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