

## Early childhood art education: A palimpsest

Felicity McArdle & Barbara Piscitelli

Published as:

McArdle, F., & Piscitelli, B. (2002). Early childhood art education: A palimpsest.  
*Australian Art Education*, 25(1), 11-15

The idea of teaching art with young children can evoke much discussion and debate about the value of art, its place in society and schools, and how it is best taught. Some people think that to teach art 'properly', all you need to do is provide an attractive array of materials, a safe environment, be a warm and loving person, and ensure that the children are "having fun". Many exemplary teachers and artists insist that they do not *teach* art with young children – they argue that art comes from the children, that the children simply explore, experiment, and express themselves. However, a close examination of these teachers' and artists' practices invariably shows them guiding, modelling, demonstrating skills and techniques, providing children with opportunities to practise and master skills, organising, and enacting teaching in any number of ways. Even so, they don't like to think or speak of their work as teaching. The work of these teachers and artists is described ironically as teaching, without teaching (McArdle, 2001).

Research in early childhood art education has enjoyed an increased amount of attention over recent years (e.g., Bresler, 1994; Kindler, 1996; Matthews, 1999; Piscitelli, 1996; Thompson, 1995; Wright, 2000). A review of the literature shows multiple forces pulling in different directions, with policy statements emerging from the field of early childhood *and* the field of art education. Uncertainties are perpetuated in a number of common beliefs or "myths" about the nature of art, development and creativity of young children (Kindler, 1996). At the site where a young child is learning about art, there are points where ideas about the child, art and teaching meet, sometimes connecting, sometimes colliding, sometimes competing.

The complexity and diversity of influences that have shaped views on the teaching of art can be understood as a "palimpsest". A palimpsest is a term that describes the way in which the ancient parchments used for writing were written over, but new messages only partially obliterated the original message beneath. Both the new and the original messages still stand, albeit partially erased and interrupted (Davies, 1993). A reading of the numerous philosophies and practices of art education throughout our relatively recent history allows us to see familiar things in new ways. This new way of seeing enables the continuous exploration of new ideas in bids to improve practice, whilst recognising that traces of previous thinking are not always completely obliterated but, instead, recur, shape and interact with new developments.



Questions about the nature and purpose of art have been vigorously addressed in many forums. As with all discourses, a conversation about what counts as art is shaped informed by a number of views that have emerged or reappeared at different times, in different cultures and contexts. In some cultures, art is part of everyday life. In other cultures, art is viewed as a trim – it is seen as non-essential, or even elitist. Yet, art also can be considered a valuable commodity, attracting large amounts of money; to others, art is thought to be above commercial interests. Some look for skills and technique in art; others look for freedom and spontaneous self-expression. Such differing views of the nature and purpose of art shape our beliefs about the place of art in the education of young children.

In the early years of schooling, art can be sidelined, left to Friday afternoons, or called upon only for special occasions, such as festivals or school fetes. In addition school art often can involve children in activities in which they are more acted upon, rather than being active participants in artistic processes. The messages of such didactic approaches to the arts are that adults make the rules about how art should look, and that young children are incompetent or incapable of making artistic decisions (Fucigna, Ives, & Ives, 1982).

How much teaching should the teacher do in the arts? Should young children be left to express themselves, without interference from the teacher? When is it right for the teacher to intervene? What is the best way for the teacher to help the young child's developing artistry? Will too much interference damage the young child's artistry, or worse, damage their self-esteem? These are the types of questions that cloud teachers' thinking about how to teach art with young children. Ideally, children should be encouraged to be active participants in shaping their own directions while engaging in art – to take risks, explore and create – while also learning to master artistic media and develop competence with the support of adults. Or, is this kind of art education what Valerie Walkerdine (1992, p.16) refers to as an “impossible fiction”?

To explore some of the palimpsest of early childhood art education, we re-read some of the layers of ideas that have informed decisions in early childhood art education in the past twenty five years. In that time, researchers and scholars of early childhood art education have stressed the importance of social interaction. An early advocate of this position was Nancy Smith of Bank Street College who held the view that children's development as artists is enhanced by the process of social interaction (Smith, 1982 & 1983). Smith challenged Lowenfeld's limited theories and emphasised instead a dynamic interactive approach to early childhood art education, a process where children and adults interchange skills, knowledge and ideas in a climate of cooperative learning (1982). Smith described a new way of thinking about young children's art and presented a challenge to the dominant view of children's art as purely of value for its natural, free and spontaneous qualities. She also paid attention to the



matter of the child's creation of meaning, and indicated the important role of the teacher in guiding and enabling children's capacities as competent, creative thinkers.

Though Smith's ideas have been around for a quarter of a century, it would appear that few of her messages have been taken up in early childhood art education in Australia. In preschools, child care centres, kindergartens and lower primary schools all across Australia, children draw and paint on a regular basis, and that is certainly a good thing. However, their art education is usually of the *laissez-faire* style where the old slogan, "the process is more important than the product", dominates teachers' philosophies and classroom practices. This point of view has dominated Australian early childhood education from the 1960s with the publication of Frances Derham's (1961) classic and best selling book, *Art for the child under seven*.

Derham wrote this little book at the end of her career as art teacher at the Melbourne Kindergarten Teachers College; it contains her thoughts about how best to offer art to young children. She strongly endorsed regular opportunities for children to be able to draw, paint and model. Viktor Lowenfeld's work provided a conceptual framework for Derham's ideas (Lowenfeld, 1939 & 1947). She advocated a strictly removed attitude about interaction with young children and their art, and indicated that adults should not question a child about the ideas expressed in the art works (Derham, 1961: 12). She damned all kinds of copying, trivial examples and teacher-led activities. Each chapter in her book enumerates a list of "don't" messages:

*Regarding drawing:*

Don't have copying in any form (1961:15)

Don't suggest a child 'fill the page' (1961:15).

Don't press for explanations (she says to "just be receptive and interested, and *if* there is any meaning you may learn it") (1961: 15).

Don't give square paper (1961:15).

*Regarding modelling:*

Don't give modelling tools (1978:58).

*Regarding collage:*



Allow the child to make his own discoveries and his own decisions – and DON'T suggest anything (1978:66).

...don't provide pre-cut shapes of any kind (1978:66) ...

DON'T draw or trace any outline for the child to cut around (1978:66).

DON'T use beans, seeds rice or any edible things (1978:66).

Derham's dogmatic ideas did not always make sense to practitioners and sometimes even her closest colleagues doubted the wisdom of her dictums (Piscitelli, 1994); one teacher-colleague from Melbourne recalled her consternation about how best to approach art:

I used to wonder why we didn't draw sometimes because teachers sat at the table and fiddled with clay and worked at the table with waste materials. But, we didn't pick up a crayon. We could use clay with the children, but we could not draw. It was instilled in us that you didn't impose your ideas on the children.

I can remember Mrs Derham talking to us on several occasions about the clay. About the preparation and presentation – it had to be the right consistency. We asked, "What can we do at the table with the clay?". And she said that we could work with the material but that we couldn't make anything. So later, in the classrooms, it didn't feel quite right doing something with the clay, but I would find things to say like "this would make a good base" or "that would make a smooth fencepost". But we had to keep away from making a thing: it was tricky.

We couldn't draw something, nor could we direct a child to draw something. Late in the third term, I might suggest that the child might draw something about two children playing a game together. I never felt too sure about that – it was like giving a child ideas.

Since the early 1980s, new theories about art education have shifted from the perspective of "natural unfolding" and "self expression" to a more social, aesthetic and cognitive reading of art education. Many early childhood art educators and researchers espouse an approach of social interaction (Kindler, 1996a and b; Kolbe, 1991; Matthews, 1999; Wright, 1991). In the latter part of the twentieth century, the social interaction theories of Lev Vygotsky (1978) gained public credibility in education as they afforded people a way of looking at the dynamic interaction of children with adults. In particular, teachers and researchers became intrigued with the nexus between what a child could do unaided and what would happen if guidance were provided. Not surprisingly, the results have been very interesting: documented evidence has shown children and adults co-constructing ideas and making artworks in a climate of community collaboration (Kindler, 1996b; Kolbe, 2001; Rinaldi, 1993). Such notions are antithetical to the natural unfolding ideas implicit in Derham's *Art for the Child under Seven*



and have caused dissonance about how to make sense of her laissez-faire, non-interventionist ideas in light of current approaches to education, and to art education in particular.

The complexity of the palimpsest is further developed when current views of pedagogy and the child are considered alongside this reading of art education. Current discourses of art education have been influenced by *progressivism* and democratic ideals, which include notions of child-centred and hands-on learning, and freedom for the individual (Dewey, 1902, 1916;). *Creativity and problem solving skills* are currently favoured in the education discourse in many countries (Eckersley, 1992; Fowler, 1996). *Active discovery* has become closely linked with play, and one of the enduring mantras in early childhood literature is “children learn through play” (Berk, 1997; Katz, 1996; Perry & Irwin, 2000). Multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983) have become an accepted conceptual framework for teachers’ work, and many believe art should hold a privileged position within the curriculum. Current notions of early childhood education advocate the adoption of a *master/apprentice* model of teaching, and position the teacher as a *protagonist*, working alongside children who are pursuing self-determined projects (Malaguzzi, 1993).

Recent views of the child centre on democratic principles, where children are seen to be *freely-choosing individuals*. Some contemporary early childhood educators advocate the view of young children as *competent beings*, co-constructors of knowledge, with whom art can be taught as one of the multiple languages available to children without destroying the children’s sense of freedom. Such co-construction is seen as an enhancement of young children’s enjoyment of learning (Dahlberg et al., 1999; Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1994; Malaguzzi, 1993).

In spite of all of these influencing factors on our beliefs about art teaching, it is interesting that the issue of “freedom above discipline” remains as a dominant discourse of art when compared to other curriculum areas such as literacy or numeracy. While most early childhood educators believe it is the right of every child to be taught the disciplines of language and mathematics, “freedom” still takes precedence when it comes to the right of every child to become visually and artistically literate.

Faced with such inconsistencies and contradictions between the spheres of educational practices, teachers may be excused for throwing their arms in the air, and sticking to the “tried and true” practices they have come to know and with which they feel a degree of certainty (Kindler, 1996a). Exemplary art teachers seem to read the palimpsest of messages about art education for young children and find ways to combine opposing messages about “proper” teaching into a credible description of practice. In essence, early childhood art educators blur the boundaries between natural unfolding and guided learning, between creativity and technical training - in an attempt to define how to teach, without teaching (McArdle, 2001).

## References

- Berk, Laura. (1997). *Child Development (Fourth Edition)*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Bresler, Liora. (1994). "Zooming in on the qualitative paradigm in art education: Educational criticism, ethnography and action research", *Visual Arts Research*, 20 (1), 1 – 19.
- Dahllberg, G., Moss, P., & Pence, A. (1999). *Beyond quality in early childhood education and care: Postmodern perspectives*. London: Falmer Press.
- Davies, Bronwyn. (1993). *Shards of glass*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Derham, Frances. (1961) *Art for the Child under Seven*, Canberra: Australian Pre-School Association. (Further editions: second, 1962; third, 1967; fourth, 1970; fifth, 1973.)
- Dewey, John. (1902). *The child and the curriculum*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Dewey, John. (1916). *Democracy and education*. New York: The Free Press.
- Eckersley, R. (1992). *Youth and the challenge to change: Bringing youth, science and society together in the new millennium*. Carlton: Australia's Commission for the Future.
- Edwards, C., Gandini, L. & Forman, G. (1994). *The hundred languages of children*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Fucinga, C., Ives, K., & Ives, W. (1982). "Art for toddlers: a developmental approach". *Young children*, 37 (2), 45 – 51.
- Gardner, Howard. (1983). *Frames of Mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*. London: Heinemann.
- Katz, Lilian. (1996). *Children as learners: A developmental approach*. Paper presented at the Weaving Webs: Collaborative Teaching and Learning in the Early Years Curriculum Conference, University of Melbourne.
- Kindler, Anna. (1996a). "Myths, habits, research and policy: The four pillars of early childhood art education", *Arts Education Policy Review*, 97 (4), 24 – 30.
- Kindler, Anna. (1996b). "Artistic learning in early childhood: A study of social interactions", *Canadian review of art education* 21 (2), 91 – 106.



Kolbe, Ursula. (2001). *Rapunzel's Supermarket: all about art and young children*. Sydney NSW: Peppinot Press.

Kolbe, Ursula, (1991). "Planning a visual arts program for children under five years". In Wright, Susan (Ed.), *The Arts in Early Childhood*, Sydney: Prentice Hall.

Lowenfeld, Viktor. (1939). *The Nature of Creative Activity*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Lowenfeld, Viktor, *Creative and Mental Growth*, New York: Macmillan, 1947.

McArdle, F. (2001). *Art in early childhood. The discourse of 'proper' teaching*. Unpublished PhD, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane.

McArdle, F. (1999). "Art and young children: doing it properly". *Contemporary issues in early childhood*, 1(1), pp. 102-105. [www.triangle.co.uk/ciec](http://www.triangle.co.uk/ciec).

Malaguzzi, Loris. (1993). "History, ideas and basic philosophy." In C. Edwards, L. Gandini & G. Forman (Eds.) *The hundred language of children*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Matthews, John. (1999). *The art of childhood and adolescence: The construction of meaning*, London: Falmer Press.

Perry, Rosemay & Liz Irwin. (2000) *Playing with curriculum*. Brisbane: QUT.

Piscitelli, Barbara. (1996). *Designing art programs for young children: lecture and workshop program*. Brisbane: QUT.

Piscitelli, Barbara. (1994). *The life of Frances Derham: Process, product and reflections*, Unpublished doctoral dissertation, James Cook University.

Rinaldi, Carlina. (1993). "The emergent curriculum and social constructivism" in Edwards, Carolyn, Lella Gandini & George Forman (Eds.) *The hundred languages of children" The Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Smith, Nancy. (1992). "The visual arts in early childhood education: Development and the creation of meaning", in Spodek, Bernard (Ed.) *Handbook for Research in Early Childhood Education*, New York: Free Press.

Smith, Nancy. (1993). *Experience and Art: Teaching Children to Paint*, New York: Teachers College Press.

Thompson, Christine M. (1995). "Transforming curriculum in the visual arts". In S. Bredekamp & T. Rosengrant (Eds.), *Reaching potentials: Transforming early childhood curriculum and assessment (Vol 2)*. Washington: NAEYC.

Vygotsky, Lev. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Walkerdine, Valerie. (1992). "Progressive pedagogy and political struggle". In C. Luke & J. Gore (Eds.), *Feminisms and critical pedagogy*. New York: Routledge.

Wright, Susan. (2000). "Challenging literacy perspectives". Proceedings of the 2000 Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) Conference, University of Sydney.

Wright, Susan. (1991). "Beyond a developmental approach to the arts", in Wright, Susan (Ed.), *The Arts in Early Childhood*, Sydney: Prentice Hall.

