

## *Play with a purpose: deepening young children's engagement with the visual arts in the early childhood environment*

*Michelle Bugler*



Michelle has worked in many school settings over the last 20 years, mostly with young children and the visual arts. Working with young children and art is Michelle's passion, and she is now the Director of Artstar Children's Art Studio, a specialised art school for children from the age of two up to adults. Michelle works extensively with teachers, facilitating workshops aimed at expanding understanding of art curriculum, skills, techniques and children's experiences. Michelle has curated and displayed many children's art exhibitions, the most recent, in 2009, at Brisbane Institute of Art. Michelle is also a practising artist who recently held her fourth solo exhibition at Doggett St Studio in Brisbane.

All early childhood educators are familiar with the standard art experiences that form the staple of play-based choices in the early years learning environment. These are: painting at easels, the clay or playdough table, and the collage area. In a creative, play-based environment, children are encouraged to explore with these materials in their own way and time. This 'natural unfoldment' of children's artistic development forms a philosophy that derives itself from the original theories about children's learning in art that were espoused by theorist Viktor Lowenfeld, and in Australia, Frances Derham (Piscitelli, 1993). Lowenfeld (1947) strongly advocated the 'hands-off' approach, where teachers were discouraged from scaffolding children's art experiences with instruction regarding skill development or technique.

Recent research in the field of early childhood art education (Knight, 2008, Kolbe, 2001; McArdle & Piscitelli, 2002; Wright, 1991) has shown that, whilst children need to freely 'play' and experiment with art media and technique, a balanced approach is necessary, where creative, play-based activities are combined with supported learning episodes which enhance technique, skills and develop artistry.

In the day-to-day running of many early childhood education environments, the art

experiences which encourage deeper learning and engagement in children are often neglected due to teachers' perceived lack of knowledge regarding art skills and ideas. A recent study (Garvis, S; Twigg, D; & Pendergast, D. 2011) found that

*... early childhood teachers may feel they have little capability when teaching the arts in their own classroom. In the long term, these experiences may contribute to lower teacher efficacy for the arts, creating a cyclical problem of failure for arts education in early childhood.*

To make matters worse, many teachers remember their own art experiences at school, and with this as their point of reference, may still structure art experiences for their classrooms that reflect the 'reproductive' approach, with the aim being to 'reproduce a product pre-determined by the teacher' (Miller, et al. 2008).

Teachers wishing to provide better art experiences in their classrooms are often frustrated by the few choices offered to extend their knowledge. Most understand that it is not enough to provide an array of attractive materials to children: knowledge of the artistic process is important (McArdle, 2005). Unfortunately, professional development for teachers in the area of visual arts that focusses on practical skills, technique

development, artistry and ideas for the classroom is scant.

Workshops to develop teachers' confidence and therefore their willingness to incorporate art into their programme, should provide practical art approaches which aim to extend and deepen teachers' experiences of the activities found in most early years environments. In experiencing the process of art-making, and in working on their own artistry, teachers are then able to apply their understanding to the learning environment, focussing on processes and approaches rather than 'filler activities' which are widely used for special activities such as Easter or Mother's Day.

### **COLLAGE**

Collage in early childhood environments can become a very token activity in that it is often just a 'cut, paste and tape' time-filler. In the art world, collage is a very complex and exciting approach to creative expression. The artist Henri Matisse spent the latter years of his career exploring the possibilities of collage, calling it 'drawing with scissors'. In this project, children were shown Matisse's collages and how he explored shapes using scissors. Teachers can demonstrate the 'drawing with scissors' approach to children by explaining how shapes can be made with straight lines, wiggly lines, skinny lines and fat lines. Children can then explore cutting with coloured card in their own time, keeping the shapes they cut. An important aspect of this task is to get children to think about the *negative space* created when an object is cut. This is the remaining area left that forms the space around the shape.

When each child has collected a selection of cut shapes, the process of screenprinting can be used. This involves having several silkscreens and working in small groups. The process starts with putting the shapes on paper, laying the screen over the shapes and smoothing paint over the surface using a squeegee. The screen and shapes are then pulled off, creating a picture from the negative spaces of the shapes.

### **PAINTING AND DRAWING**

This activity incorporates drawing and painting to deepen children's experiences beyond easel painting.



*Drawing with scissors*

### **Stage One**

The focus for the task is the figure. Children are asked to lie down on a large sheet of card, and an adult traces around their body shape. Each child has to think creatively about movement and putting his or her body into that shape on



*Screenprinting*

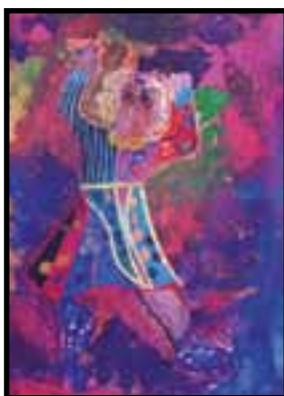
the cardboard. After the child stands up, they can see their outline on the card. The next stage is to use the paint. A variety of interesting tools can be introduced. Large brushes and sponge rollers, as well as small brushes. The use of each of these can be demonstrated by the teacher. Each child is asked to paint the background only and leave their figure unpainted.

### Stage Two

This involves painting the body. Ideally, the background will be dry before this is attempted. The children are then given many different pre-mixed skin tones and asked to colour the skin on their bodies. This time, they can paint the positive space and not get paint on the background!

### Stage Three

In the final stage, provide children with chalk pastels and ask them to draw and colour clothing on their figures. Books on ethnic clothing, fashion, pattern and design can be used as reference to enrich children's ideas.



*Alice's painting*



*Alice with her displayed painting*

### CLAY

Clay, like play-dough, is often a staple in the early childhood classroom. As a modelling compound, it gives physical, three-dimensional form to children's ideas. This activity looks at how clay can be used to explore movement of the human form with children.

### Stage One

After exploring the human body, its forms, and capability for movement, children are guided through a process of using clay to

create a body. This body may be dancing, jumping, walking, twisting, etc. The teacher can demonstrate the technique of using the clay tools to create a face and also of rolling "sausages" with the clay to form the body. It is important here to note the role of demonstration. This is simply a walk-through to show the children practical skills and thought processes and certainly not a prescriptive 'show' of what their work should look like. To avoid children thinking their work should be like the teacher's, it is important to take the demonstration 'model' away before the children start working! The sausage-shaped sections of clay are then manipulated to depict a body and movement. Toes, fingers, and clothes can be added as children explore the activity in their own way. The completed, dried figure must be glued to the cardboard sheet using PVA glue.

### Stage Two and Three

The children can use paint to colour the negative space around their sculpture. It is important that they try not to paint the figure itself! When the background is dry, children can use small brushes to paint the figure itself.



*Ngaire rolls sausage shapes with clay*



*Helena's moving figure with clay*

### MIXED MEDIA

Mixed media is a term describing art that is made using a variety of materials. This project explores the sculpting of a head using papier-mache pulp called claycrete. The children construct a head around a pre-made armature



Alice's Portrait sculpture



Helena's portrait sculpture



Ben and Helena enjoy the work on display



Ava with her portrait sculpture

and build the features: eyes, nose, mouth, and ears. They then use a variety of materials: jewellery, clay, wool, match sticks, glue, glitter and any other found objects of interest to explore personal adornment. The details of varying shades of skin tones can also be explored, along with interesting ideas to create hair!

### EXHIBITION: SHARING CHILDREN'S CREATIVE ENDEAVOURS

Like any artists, children love sharing their creative endeavours with their community. Visual Arts experiences provide teachers with wonderful ways to involve and develop relationships with parents, care givers and the larger community. Displaying children's work in the environment is a vital final step in celebrating the creative endeavours of children. Working with teachers to develop artistry and confidence in their own visual arts practice is the important first step in ensuring our children have positive art experiences in the early childhood learning environment.

*All photographs were taken during studio lessons at Artstar Children's Art Studio. Images of the children and their works on display were taken in the Artstar Gallery, an artspace especially for children and families. Our details are [www.artstarstudio.com.au](http://www.artstarstudio.com.au)*

### References

Garvis, S; Twigg, D & Pendergast, D. (2011) 'Breaking the negative cycle: The formation of self-efficacy beliefs

in the arts. A focus on professional experience in pre-service teacher education', *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, Vol.36, No.2, June 2011.

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

Knight, Linda (2008) 'Communication and transformation through collaboration: Rethinking drawing activities in Early Childhood', *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, Vol. 9, No. 4, pp.306-316.

Lowenfeld, V (1947) *Creative and Mental Growth*, Macmillan Co. New York.

Miller, Melinda G., Nicholas, Ellen L. & Lambeth, Meaghan L. (2008) 'Pre-service teachers' critical reflections of Arts and Education Discourse: reconstructions of experiences in early childhood and higher education', *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, Vol.9, No.4, pp. 354-364.

McCardle, F. (2008) 'The Arts and staying cool', *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, Vol.9 No.4, pp. 365-374.

McArdle, F. (2005) 'The Arts in Early Childhood: The Da Vinci Code', *Educating Young Children*, Vol.11, No.2, pp.49-51.

McArdle, F & Piscitelli, B (2002) 'Early Childhood Art Education: A Palimpsest', *Australian Early Childhood*, 25(1), 11-15.

Piscitelli, B. (1993) 'Frances Derham and the expressive arts: Her life and legacy', *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, Vol.18, No.1, pp3-9.

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

Copyright of Educating Young Children: Learning & Teaching in the Early Childhood Years is the property of Early Childhood Teaching Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.