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The Art of the Matter: the development and extension of ways of knowing in the Arts

The Art of the Matter project focused on learning and teaching in the Arts, and investigated how children develop their ideas and related skills in each of the Arts' disciplines (dance, drama, music, and visual art) in the primary school. It also scrutinised the nature of any "ritual patterns" (Efland, 2002; Nuthall, 2001) of teaching that support or constrain Arts education, and, by doing so, considered pedagogical processes that deepen children's experience and understanding in the Arts. As a major outcome, the project sought to further knowledge of how generalist teachers can enhance and extend children's learning in the Arts.

The project comprised a team of 10 generalist primary school teacher-researchers working alongside three university-researchers over a period of two years in eight schools, with children across the Years 0–6 age range. The project was also informed by the expertise of two consultants: Dr Viv Aitken (drama education) and Sue Cheesman (dance education).

Project aim and objectives

The overall aim of the project was to investigate how the development of ideas in the Arts can be promoted and enhanced in primary classrooms and, in doing so, build knowledge related to Arts pedagogy and research. There was also the associated aim of capacity building for Arts research amongst university and teacher partners.

Objectives

In order to achieve this aim the University of Waikato (UoW) researchers, in conjunction with teacher-researchers, developed objectives that would:

- compare and contrast the particular processes and skills that children employ in classroom programmes in developing ideas within the Arts
- review the related literature
- interrogate learning and teaching in the Arts in respect to children's development of ideas
- ascertain the pedagogies and philosophies that enhance the development of ideas and related skills
- trial and evaluate interventions that aimed to extend ways in which teachers can deepen children's learning in the Arts.



Research questions

In order to achieve these objectives, the following questions guided the project:

1. What features characterise the classroom practices/processes of a sample of teachers engaging children in activities aimed at developing ideas and related skills within one or more of the Arts disciplines (music, visual art, drama, and dance)?
2. What are the children's perceptions of their own idea formation when engaged in developing their ideas in the Arts?
3. What factors shape child and teacher understandings of how ideas and related skills can be developed in the Arts through a range of classroom practices/processes?
4. What specific interventions, at either school or classroom level, appear to enhance the development of children's ideas and related skills in and through the various Arts' disciplines?

Research design and methodology

The design of the study drew on ethnographic, case-study, self-study, and action-research traditions of educational research. The initial case studies were devised from an amalgam of classroom observations, work samples, surveys, school documents, interviews, and reflective self-study comments. These case studies provided a platform upon which to base the subsequent action research phase wherein teacher-researchers, with the assistance of their university colleagues, devised questions of concern to explore problems, issues, and possibilities.

Findings

The initial case studies revealed a number of common rituals of practice in classrooms which could support or constrain what happened when children were learning in the Arts. The specifics of these rituals are outlined in the full report.

After the identification of existing rituals, a number of interventions based on teacher-researchers' action research questions were trialled with the support of their university colleagues. The findings suggest that the Arts offer extensive opportunities for learning in and through largely nonverbal ways of knowing. Arguably, drama is the most "verbal" of these art forms given the speech aspects of drama conventions, such as teacher-in-role, hot-seating, and spoken thoughts. However, each art form embraces ways of knowing that support the learner in expressing things in ways that words cannot, or in ways in which words are not adequate. For example,

a teacher-researcher used dance movements to give feedback and feedforward to her class. This innovation was quickly adopted by the children who devised their own unique nonverbal feedback which they danced to each other. As a result, nonverbal peer feedback, feedforward, plus receivers' response, became a regular part of the dance class. As Bannon and Sanderson (2000) explained, "dance offers a distinct from of communication separate from the expressive statement of direct speech" (p. 16).

The findings suggest that group dynamics affect the idea development pathway and creative outcome as of necessity, it requires compromise. This means that individual idea generation and development may be thwarted by the collective power of the group. The purpose for using group work needs to be considered carefully, for the social skills required may over-shadow the desire for a quality, creative outcome. The project also found much potential in children as peer tutors in both formal and informal ways.

Also in music, the study signals that the use of symbols has several purposes in the compositional process, but the best use of symbols in the teaching-learning process is less clear. If it is to recall and refine work that could be lost in time because of the temporal, sonic nature of sound, then it clearly has efficacy. If it is for performance retrieval of a simple sound piece, quality of sound making is vital. Quality can be compromised if children slavishly adhere to a score rather than immerse themselves in the ensemble of group performance.

The drama findings from the action-research phase revealed the important distinction that the use of teacher-in-role deepens children's *commitment*, but skilful and timely use of drama conventions deepens *ideas*. The generalist teacher needs to draw on their intuitive understanding of when children are ready to accept more responsibility within the drama. As Prior (2001) noted, the major challenge for the teacher is to let go and share "the created world with their students" (p. 28).

The project found that there are multiple paradigms at work in visual art: mimetic, expressivist, formalist, discipline based, and the postmodern. Across these multiple paradigms, the study found that children tend to take independent creative risks in situations where the outcome is low stakes, that is, in page backgrounds or margins, when experimenting with media, and in private sketch books. Links to popular visual culture, visual problems, and lived experiences open a dialogue between child and child, plus teacher and child, about art.

The study also found that while each art form is a distinct and unique discipline, there are also a number of common features to consider when teaching and learning in the Arts, details of which are outlined in the full report.



It is noteworthy that the ways in which the Arts were taught were influenced by the culture, philosophy, leadership, and structural processes of each school. This project comprised schools with very different approaches to teaching the Arts and these variations from school-to-school were marked and affected the ways in which the Arts were learnt, valued, and assessed.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations to this project as outlined here. First, a strength of the study is that it provides rich case studies of current practice and outlines a range of innovative interventions that enhance children's learning. However, the size of the project (10 teacher-researchers in eight schools) is relatively small. A larger sample would have added a broader and more generalised dimension to the findings. It is interesting to note, however, how closely the findings resonate with much of the current international literature. Second, the perspectives of parents, caregivers, and those in the wider local Arts communities are not part of this study. Further research could include their perspectives. Third, the wider school culture was found to have a large influence on what happened in classrooms and the broader sociocultural context. While touched on in this study, this influence warrants further scrutiny. Fourth, the time frames of the project required flexible planning to enable response to competing commitments. Changes to the school staff involved proved to be both a limitation and a strength. New project members, while needing time to integrate with the research team, were highly motivated. Fifth, the wider influence the project had beyond the teacher-researchers and their in-school buddies was determined by school leadership and philosophy and varied markedly from school to school.

Contribution to capacity and capability

Collaborative school and university research projects such as this are inevitably labour intensive endeavours that require the careful negotiation of trust and the joint critique of current practice. Such partnerships aim to bridge the divide between academia and the profession and can help to mitigate the common problem of theory-practice divisions.

Some of the challenges in this project included: the balancing of passion and disinterest in an area that is marginalised in curriculum and educational policy; navigating the different goals and distinctive interests of teachers and academics; negotiating the interface between school and university cultures; and balancing risk and trust. Details of how these challenges were navigated feature in the full report.

Collaborative research of this nature builds research capacity amongst teachers who have direct influence on the children they teach. The research process, in the hands of teachers with the support of academics, has potential for change that benefits and enhances children's learning alongside improvements in teachers' pedagogy.

Implications and conclusion

The Arts offer multiple opportunities for learning in and through largely nonverbal ways of knowing. Valuing Arts-related intelligences effectively reduces the inequality of a system that privileges the linguistic and logical mathematical. Interpretive dialogues are further opportunities for children to share their own unique views and construct understanding of the richness of what the Arts offer.

Further research needs to acknowledge and capture more about nonverbal ways of knowing in order to construct deeper understanding of learning in and through the Arts. We need more empirical evidence about the processes involved in development of ideas and further trialling of the conceptual model presented in this study. The critical support of school leaders is required so that the Arts are not relegated to the margins by competing priorities, but rather, are part of schools' strategic plans (Ministry of Education, 2006). Finally, care is required to ensure that an outcomes based curriculum does not thwart the flexible purposing and expressive objectives the Arts need (Eisner, 1994).

References

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Publications

A variety of publications have already emerged and more are in progress. Two of these are written solely by teacher-researchers (Jones, 2005; Tyson, 2005); one is written by an in-school “buddy” of a teacher-researcher (Dunn, 2006); and four are joint university-school papers. The others are written by the university-researchers.

Dunn, N. (2006). Tauriko school take part in study. *Creative Focus*, 1, 11.

Fraser, D. (2006, December). *The art and challenge of collaborative research*. Paper presented at the NZARE Conference, Rotorua, New Zealand.

Fraser, D. (2006, April). *Exploring children's development of ideas in the arts through joint school/university research*. Paper presented at the Dialogues and Differences Conference, Melbourne, Australia.

Fraser, D., Henderson, C., & Price, G. (2005, July). *The art of the matter: Researching children's learning in art, music, drama and dance*. Proceedings of the Imagination and Education Conference, Vancouver, Canada. Available at: <http://www3.educ.sfu.ca/conferences/ierg2005/papers.php>

Fraser, D., Henderson, C., Price, G., Bevege, F., Bush, T., Gilbert, G., Goodman, A., Klemick, A., Pye, F., Rose, L., & Tyson, S. (2006). Getting to the art of the matter. *Education Review*, 11(5), 11.

Fraser, D., Henderson, C., Price, G., Aitken, V., Cheesman, S., Bevege, F., Klemick, A., Rose, L., & Tyson, S. (in press). Examining and disrupting rituals of practice in the primary classroom. *Education*, 3–13.

Henderson, C. (2006, April). *Exploring children's development of ideas in music and dance through joint school/university research*. Paper presented at the Dialogues and Differences Conference, Melbourne, Australia.

Henderson, C., Bevege, F., & Tyson, S. (2006, December). *Investigating non-verbal ways of knowing through collaborative school/university action research in music and dance*. Paper presented at NZARE Conference, Rotorua, New Zealand.

Jones, O. (2005, November). *Children, dance and creativity*. Paper presented at the Teacher Research Symposium, The University of Waikato, Hamilton.

Price, G. (2006, April). *Researching idea development of ideas in the teaching of the arts by generalist primary teachers: visual arts case studies*. Paper presented at the Dialogues and Differences Conference, Melbourne, Australia.

Price, G., Klemick, A., & Gilbert, G. (2006, December). *The arts on a spirit level: Finding the balance between intuition and planned intervention in developing students' ideas*. Paper presented at NZARE Conference, Rotorua, New Zealand.

Tyson, S. (2005, November). *The art of the matter: The learning journey of a teacher-researcher in the arts*. Paper presented at the Teacher Research Symposium, The University of Waikato, Hamilton.

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Lead researchers and authors



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