

# CAPTURED VOICES IN PRIMARY SCHOOL ART EDUCATION

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**ABSTRACT** *Eisner (1972) articulated a long-standing orientation in art education as he described the triadic relationship between socio-centric, child-centred and discipline-centred approaches in art education praxis. Hickman (2005) observed that teachers and students are now positioned to embrace a wider range of discourses as to what art might be. This impacts on why students make art and how it is taught. Wider arts discourse has resulted in influential paradigms and historically preferred arts pedagogies (Efland, 2002, 2004; Eisner, 1972; Kerlavage, 1992; Price, 2005). These discourses influence policy, curriculum, teacher beliefs about art and ultimately the ways in which these influences are played out in classrooms. Eisner (2002) argued the need for “empirically grounded examples of artistic thinking related to the nature of the tasks students engage in, the materials they work with, the context’s norms and the cues the teacher provides to advance their students thinking” (p. 217). This paper draws on such theory and a two year action-research project, *The Art of the Matter* (Fraser et al., 2006) involving case studies and analysis. This paper focuses on a Year 4 to Year 6 ‘drawing into painting’ context taught by experienced generalist teachers in New Zealand primary schools. The influence of school culture and programme structures is explored. I raise questions as to which socio-cultural and discipline-centred voices generalist teachers have been captured by, and consider to what extent it possible to still discern a student whisper under the clamour and control of adult proscribed activity.*

## **KEYWORDS**

Art education, Pedagogy, Paradigms, Primary school, Case study

## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper uses case study analysis to examine current generalist primary school teacher practices in visual arts education. By doing so, the theoretical stance implied by teacher actions is illustrated. As art educators, we are entrusted to support the emergence of children’s imagery in seemingly eclectic ways accrued through historically situated art education paradigms and socially situated school programmes. In contrast to these wider perspectives, at the micro level Federico Lorca poetically reminds us of the fragile gift of a child’s voice.

**El niño mudo** [The mute child]

The little boy was looking for his voice.

(The king of the crickets had it.)

In a drop of water the little boy was looking for his voice.

I do not want it for speaking with; I will make a ring of it  
so that he may wear my silence on his little finger  
In a drop of water the little boy was looking for his voice.  
(The captive voice, far away, put on a cricket's clothes.)  
Federico García Lorca 1956. (Lorca, 2005, p. 55)

The notion of a voice being 'captive' can be applied to both teachers and children. When past educational practices and theories remain unexamined by teachers, their pedagogical approaches may lead to art opportunities that are muted by habit or fashion. The lost voices of children are captured by encouragement to dress up in clothes alien to their own experiences and the induction into worlds that marginalise the visual worlds the children actually inhabit.

Underpinning this paper is a government funded research project into arts pedagogy in New Zealand primary schools, *The Art of the Matter* (Fraser et al., 2006). One focus of the project was to document the way in which teachers and children within participating schools were interpreting the 'developing ideas' strand of the *Arts in New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2000). This paper addresses that question through case studies from three schools' visual arts units at the Year 4 to Year 6 level.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Action research methodology was collaboratively used in eight primary schools selected to provide a cross section of pedagogical approaches used by *generalist* primary school teachers across all four art disciplines: drama, dance, music and visual arts. The sample provided a range of school socio-economic profiles and urban and rural locations in order to gather data and prepare case studies. With 10 teachers operating as co-researchers in an action research project, the data collection spanned two years. Data included school policy analysis and planning documentation, and multiple triangulated classroom observations using both teacher and university researchers. In the visual arts in three schools, the collection and analysis of cumulative portfolios of student work and the use of semi-structured teacher and pupil interviews allowed cross-checking of emergent interpretations. Further opportunities to grow a shared body of interpretation was facilitated through round table discussions at the University of Waikato where generalist teachers presented data to each other under the guidance of research partners. Together, we explored refinements to our methodologies, the teachers' research questions, and generated and challenged emergent themes.

## **THE INFLUENCE OF DOMINANT ART EDUCATION PEDAGOGIES**

The review of art education literature evolved concurrently, with themes emerging from the observed research data, and provided a framework for exploring what may shape generalist pedagogy at this level of schooling. Art education literature identifies historically dominant pedagogies advocated in the USA (Dorn, 1994; Efland, 2002; Eisner, 1972; Lowenfeld, 1947) and in the United Kingdom (Abbs, 1987; Hickman, 2005; Read, 1943; Taylor, 1992; Witkin, 1974). New Zealand art

education practice has drawn heavily on constructions of art education theory in the Anglo-American literature (Bell, 2000; Collinge, 1978; Duncum & Bracey, 2001; Grierson & Mansfield, 2003; Henderson, 1998; Langton, 2002; Price, 2005). This paper uses the theoretical lenses constructed by Efland (2004) where he summarised four dominant visions of 20th century art education that are also reflected in the New Zealand experience: 'academic art' which favoured mimetic aesthetics, 'elements of design' which favoured formalist aesthetics; 'creative self expression' which favoured expressivist aesthetics and subjective experience, and 'discipline based art education' (DBAE) which prioritised school activities based on the modes of enquiry used by artists, art critics and art historians. Efland, Freedman and Stuhr (1996) also explored postmodern approaches and critique in challenging historic art education practices. Not surprisingly, *all* of these paradigms of art education align with the eclectic rationales for a primary art education demonstrated by our sample of generalist teachers: mimetic, expressive, formalist, discipline-based and, potentially, the postmodern. In following sections these dominant visions of art are briefly described and illustrated in order to reveal their alignment with observed teacher practice.

## **INTRODUCTION TO FINDINGS**

For generalist teachers the initial case studies in three classrooms revealed some dominant discourses that underpinned the teaching of the visual arts. These were embedded assumptions about art that ultimately manifested within a framework of choices that teachers make when constructing programmes. Choices affected prioritising of skill development, choice of programme structure, what constituted 'development' of an image, and an assigned function for art in children's painting. It appeared that a dominant focus on art skill development subscribed (often unconsciously) to assumptions about art, its possible mimetic function and a perceived role for realism and narrative in child art development. The influence of curriculum documents, resource choice and the teacher's voice were revealed in both planning and teaching. Units of work were also characteristically driven by linguistic and narrative ways of knowing encapsulated in a prescribed subject or theme. For example, most units of work commenced with some ritualised form of verbal brainstorming prior to any visual research that might be carried out by children. Similarly, children's early intentions were reinforced as a verbal narrative. The collaboration between teacher-researchers and university researchers opened further opportunities to examine these preliminary findings and this paper examines two issues in depth; 1) the influence of programme structures, and 2) the links to dominant art education pedagogies.

This research comprised schools with three completely different structural approaches to teaching the visual arts in primary schools. These ranged from eight elective full days spread over a term where children were drawn from numerous classrooms, to formal, regular whole-class lessons led by a generalist teacher. Also illustrated was a term-length thematic programme fostering a school-wide approach that encouraged peer teaching and pupil responsibility for prioritising their tasks for the day. Children chose their interest groupings and were seldom working as a

whole class at any stage of the day other than a morning briefing. Further illustration of these differences follows.

### **Description of school contexts:**

#### **School A: daily drawing practice**

School A, a decile 3 city school with an equal mix of Pākehā and Māori students, offered drawing as a fundamental art activity woven into the class programme on a daily basis. Term-long themes were selected by syndicate and the teacher drew on art activities that linked by subject matter to the Year 4 language and reading programme, and general knowledge around current science and health topics. The additional challenge in this classroom, of a history of interrupted schooling and disruptive (male) learning behaviours, caused the teacher to consciously prioritise the art activity as reinforcing the formation of a cohesive learner group aligned to clear teacher expectations for learning and success along strict behaviourist models. In this context, therefore, opportunities for student ownership of ideas and divergent exploration was considerably constrained. However, within the prescribed limits, students were praised both for conformity to given models and for their independence in stepping outside given exemplars and boundaries through a teacher-centric approval process.

#### **School B: elective arts programme**

School B, a decile 10 city school with a multicultural mix of students, provided optional extension classes to Year 5 and 6 students. This elective programme ran for a term and had a full day's focus each week for 8 weeks. The sustained whole-day time frame allowed students the opportunity to maintain a high level of persistence and uninterrupted focus, with the intervening days providing opportunities for independent reflection and further research. The themes chosen were intentionally autobiographical and designed to explore and celebrate individual and cultural identities. Here, a mutual respect for unique personal histories was intended to encourage goals for social cohesion across a multicultural school context. Providing an optional setting within a primary school allowed skills to be taught at a richer level led by a generalist teacher with a passion for art. Supported by a recent commercial publication (Pearson, 2004) pitched at Years 7 – 10, the children were exposed to an in-depth study of a New Zealand artist, Nigel Brown, also exploring his own autobiographical themes. Thus, children were scaffolded into making links between their own activity and the activity of an adult artist. In this model, children had opportunity to set and pursue a visual autobiographical process. This ultimately led to the challenge of the teacher supporting widely divergent needs for visual resources and teaching strategies for gathering them, while addressing common technical media and compositional challenges for all the children. Children from different classes learned a lot about each other, their competencies and their world beyond the classroom walls, through formal and informal discussion of their chosen focus.

### **School C: peer tutoring and self directed groupings**

School C, a decile 9 semi-rural school on the city margins, provided a programme that reinforced a school-wide commitment to fostering a 'community of learning' that encouraged peer tutoring across the whole curriculum. Children rarely operated as a whole class under the instruction of the teacher. More frequently tasks were framed as 'challenges' and children pursued these with considerable maturity in self-selected groupings and negotiated daily priorities. Indeed the peer tutoring opportunities were enhanced by a known daily structure. Tasks across the curriculum were carried out simultaneously by small groups, resulting in staggered entry to all tasks. Thus, experiences learnt by one group could be, and were, shared between successive groups and individuals. It was not uncommon to observe students actively seek help from peers that were temporarily engaged in other projects. This support was modelled on the supportive reflective practice exhibited by the teacher in her regular dealings with students. Regular opportunities for group and class sharing, as well as volunteered expertise amongst students ensured many learners' experiences supplemented the teacher's voice. Themes for the term drew on shared whole class experiences outside the classroom within 'water week' experiences and the school visits to a city gymnasium. Idea development had a high degree of student autonomy through a selection of diverse visual resources provided by the teacher and supplemented by the student's own research. As the original stimulus experiences fell within the school day pupils were able to relate to and confer on each other's work and their shared memories of unique events that each had selected to portray.

### **1) THE INFLUENCE OF PROGRAMME STRUCTURES**

School programme structures and rationales influence the possibilities and limitations for development of ideas within visual art experiences. Divergent opportunities for sustained or repeated focus were enabled through flexible timetabling and the provision of options. The way in which schools structured learning opportunities aligned to school culture and philosophy. An emphasis on an individual's skill acquisition and sense of accomplishment was linked to wider school concerns of an emphasis on cohesion within the learner group, development of learning communities and enculturation of diverse ethnicities. The variations from school to school were marked and affected the ways in which the arts were taught, learned and assessed. In contrast to Holland and O'Connor (2004), who claimed that the arts *provide* co-constructed learning environments in which teachers and children learn from each other, our research found that the culture of the school and the philosophy of the teacher were major factors that influenced how the arts were taught, rather than the nature of the discipline itself. We claim that the arts, as disciplines, do not dictate exclusive pedagogical approaches that generalist teachers will employ. Neelands (2004), for example, noted that it is not drama but what we do with it that makes it efficacious. Teachers develop distinct pedagogical content knowledge, and this, along with the particular culture of each school, influences how the arts are interpreted and experienced by children. The final report of our research makes the link to socio-cultural contexts succinctly:

From a sociocultural perspective, learning and teaching in classrooms can be considered a dynamic, participatory process that occurs and is influenced by the personal, the interpersonal and the institutional (Rogoff, 2003) ... Studying children's learning in the arts cannot be severed from the social and cultural context in which that learning takes place. Those classrooms that foster a community of learning convey a seamless and dynamic relationship between teacher, learners, and the Arts media they are working with. Moreover, the social and cultural context in which learning takes place, both transforms, and is transformed by, the way in which people interact and participate within that context. (Fraser et al., 2006, p. 18)

## **2) LINKS TO DOMINANT ART EDUCATION PEDAGOGIES**

### **Mimetic tradition**

A mimetic tradition places strong emphasis on the resemblance of the artwork to known or knowable natural phenomena. In terms of children's art activity, this results in an emphasis on paint/draw what you see. Freeland (2001) observed, "E. H. Gombrich described the history of Western art as a search for progressively more vivid renderings of reality. Innovations aimed at more perfect semblances" (p. 23). The persistent valuing of a mimetic purpose for art amongst contemporary audiences is grounded in its recognisability and the equating of artistic virtuosity with the ability to produce a 'worthy' semblance of any natural phenomena. Mimetic art has its origin in a known world that is accessible to an audience and that known world is often seen to be the guarantee of the artwork's authenticity. Success is defined around the recognisable. The maintenance of this tradition has historically been tied to the acquisition of skills through 'academy-styled' training. Thus the implied pedagogy is usually teacher-directed through selected observation tasks, carried out with demonstration and exemplars on observable and accessible phenomena. 'Likeness' is an overt goal for teacher and student alike.

### **Mimetic tradition in the classroom**

The following images (Figure 1 – Figure 3) were selected from all three schools and demonstrate a common concern for a direct relationship to an observed world, the learning of conventions of handling space and composition that supports implied 'movement', and often used photographs as a reference point. School A (Figure 1) used photographs of marine creatures and, subsequently, model cars.

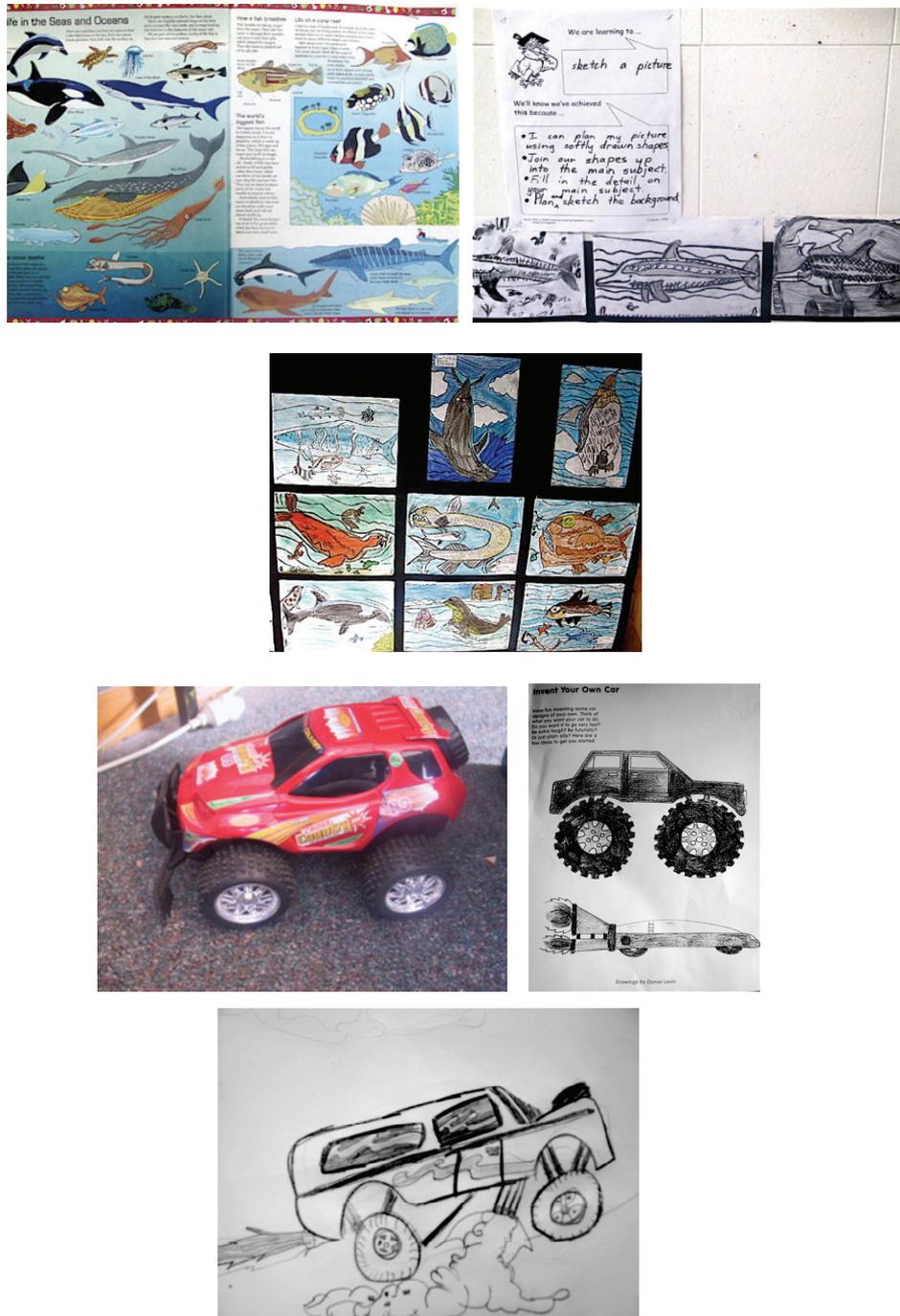
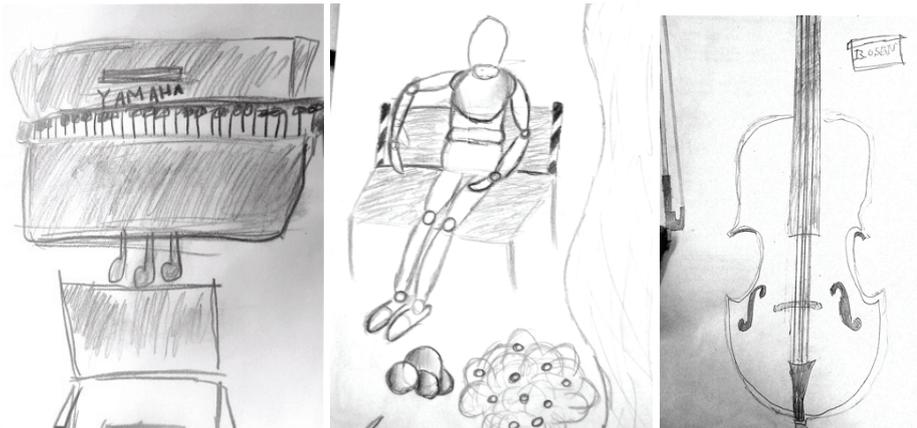


Figure 1. Samples of mimetic resources and response in School A

Commonly heard teacher statements in this room reinforced careful observation and recording. ‘Now you’ve been looking carefully’, ‘notice how in a photograph some of the objects go off the paper out of view.’

School B (Figure 2) sourced personally important objects and places and did observational drawings for homework.



**Figure 2.** *Samples of mimetic resources and response in School B*

The use of a figure manikin was encouraged to find appropriate figure postures. This was played with in puppet-like motions and helped some to solve proportional issues and clarify views.

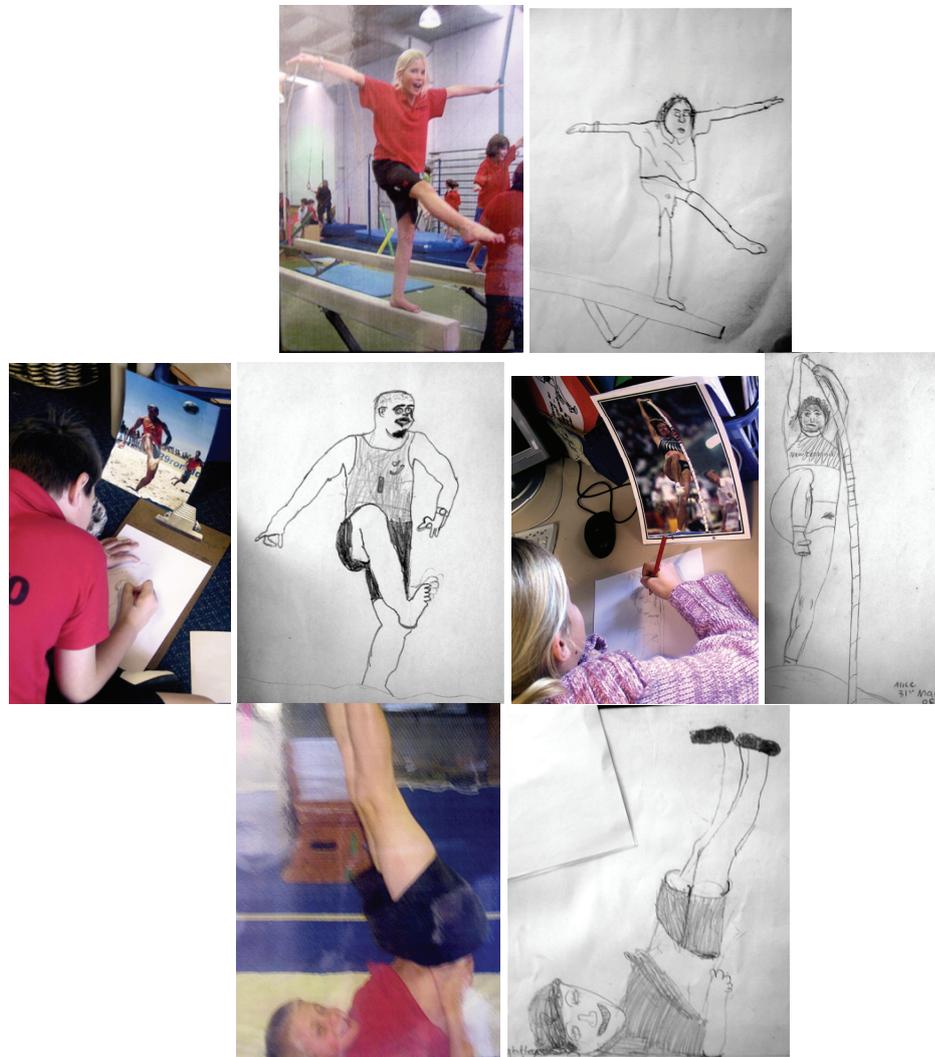
School C (Figure 3) used photos of their gymnasium experiences and sports action photos to explore how the figure looks when moving.

Thus, in all three schools, mimetic purpose was present, although the rationales and emphasis varied. All three schools valued building skills of accuracy, tone and proportion through observation-based drawing, particularly from photographic sources, in contrast to live recording from a model or environment even when this was available. The scaffolding of students away from dependency on already flattened views is a challenge yet to be addressed. Having selected their chosen resource the students settled into very focused copying. It was a lost opportunity for students that they did not have access to take their own photographs and were dependent on the eyes of others. It is at that level of subtlety that children’s voices can be further marginalised. It is not just an issue of building ownership through child selection of adult imagery, it is an issue of whose perception is being valued.

### **Expressivist tradition**

The expressivist tradition held dominance in New Zealand primary education circles from approximately 1950-1980. “One of the commonest beliefs about art is that it is essentially a form of expression, and what is more, the expression of feeling” (Graham, 2001, p. 120). Graham ascribed the popularity of expressivist

views to the inheritance of mid-19th-century Romantic theory and the fact that some artworks clearly do have the capacity to ‘move’ their audience. Within the expressivist view, the artist’s feelings and subjective experiences are skilfully embodied within the work through choice of content and the expressive use of visual devices such as heightened colour and gestural nuance. Music at the turn of the 19th century was clearly both expressive and abstract, in the sense of being freed from the requirement of description. As Harrison and Wood (2003) pointed out, expressive theory from music was adopted by the fine arts as the means to advance theories surrounding modern architecture and abstract expressionist painting. Its manifestation in education contexts is often heralded by instructions to children to ‘paint what you feel’ from remembered heightened experience.



**Figure 3.** *Samples of mimetic resources and response in School C*

Opportunities to include aspects of an imagined world are also often invited. There is often an encouragement for spontaneous response in preference to conscious reworking.

### **Expressivism in the classroom**

The teacher at School A totally eschewed an expressivist approach in his drive to give his children a skill-based sense of achievement. School C, however, initiated the first term's painting through this expressivist lens. The class experiences of 'water week' were used as a trigger for expressive writing and art. Students were also encouraged to imagine a whole new context for their observed figures in a subsequent figure unit based on a gymnasium visit. This is illustrated through the work of Joshua and Jessica. In Figure 4, Joshua was building his picture from his poem recalling heightened experiences. Joshua's water week experience of the hydro-slide was first remembered in an expressive writing exercise and then 'revised' in a tempera painting without overt reference to a photographic record.

*White slippery mini slide  
Draining crystal clear water  
Wet'n'wild snorkeling  
Exploring colourful fish  
Cold hard water polo  
Fighting for the win  
Roaring sliding boogie boards  
Surfing all the waves  
Hard tiring raft organization  
For the great race*



**Figure 4.** *Samples of Joshua's expressive response, School C*

The quick diagrammatic sketch and expressive water movement marks bear little reference to observed phenomena but attempt to capture a felt experience. It was essentially a painted memory. His later observational drawing of a long jumper's landing was integrated within an imagined water environment as a surfboard rider. In Figure 5 he translates a long jumper's movements and body position into a picture of surfing. This freedom to move away from observed phenomena to construct a new more personalised image is a healthy challenge to the 'tyranny of the real' empowered under an expressive function for art.



**Figure 5.** *Joshua's second transformed environment painting, School C*

Jessica (Figure 6) relocated her forward roll sketches based on the gym experience to a beach environment. This also introduced a strong pattern element and she supplemented her approach to painting water from observing her high school sister's gestural artwork seen at home. Her second painting shows considerable development from her earlier attempts in terms of composition, figure movement and use of colour and gesture. A sustained focus on painting across two terms has built up her confidence to take observed reality and play with conventions for expressive purposes, rather than merely accepting either recall or copying observed phenomena.



**Figure 6.** *Jessica's second transformed environment painting, School C*

**Formalist tradition**

A formalist tradition arose from experiments in art in the early 20th Century. Langer (1953), Bell (1958) and Greenberg (1961) theorised the autonomy of the self-contained abstract artwork that points to nothing other than itself. Meaning was to be found in the internal coherence of the artwork. Art-making in a formalist model was generated through a self-contained network of visual relationships that could be described after-the-fact through formalist analysis. A viewer is offered a contemplative relationship with the artwork. This stance validated modernism and legitimated artists' choices to be free from both the dictates of nature and resemblance that were encouraged by mimesis, and the excesses of psychologised emotion thought to be evident in expressivism.

Within art education, exploring the nuance of perception, Arnheim (1954) was an early lone voice championing the cognitive foundations of perception in a time when psychological and expressive views on art education held sway. Arnheim (1954) argued that perception is a cognitive act and that perceptual development matured as individuals were able to further discriminate amongst the qualities within their environment. He gave physical evidence through studies of perception to a visual, non-verbal language. Concurrently, Susan Langer suggested the nature of experiencing artworks gave rise to meaningful experiences beyond language, expressed in non-discursive symbolic form. For Langer (1953), an audience is charged to receive a necessarily non-verbal experience. She asserted that language has words and phrases for only familiar notions and that art provided a symbolic presentation of subjective reality. Contemplating art was not only tentatively beyond the words we have but impossible to express in verbal language.

In terms of the formalist view, the artist's personality and biography were deemed irrelevant outside the artist's unique vision and original contribution to 'modern art.' Wimsatt and Beardsley (1962) supported this view through publishing their philosophical challenge titled *The Intentional Fallacy*: "The design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard of judging the success of a work of literary art" (p. 95). The formalist view privileged the artist as an unquestionably 'original' author but at the same time also diminished the need for a viewer to 'know' anything more than their personal response to the artwork. Harrison and Wood (2003) caution us about giving undue importance to intention and urge us towards the development of aware and informed viewers. "... Artists do not always do what they intend, nor is what they say they have done always what they have done" (Harrison & Wood, 2003, p. 3). Further, they state that "it may be the case, as the modernist connoisseur would claim that works of art do indeed 'speak for themselves' to the adequately sensitive, adequately informed spectator" (Harrison & Wood, 2003, p. 6). The formalist view implies an elitist community of skilled and sensitised responders to the tensions and harmonies embodied in artworks. Gude (2004) challenged the way that 'the' (formalist) elements and principles of art continue to be presented as if they represent the essence of art-making. His position suggested these 'principles' were a richly engaged experiment in 1930's modernist design that have become enshrined as unchallengeable dogma

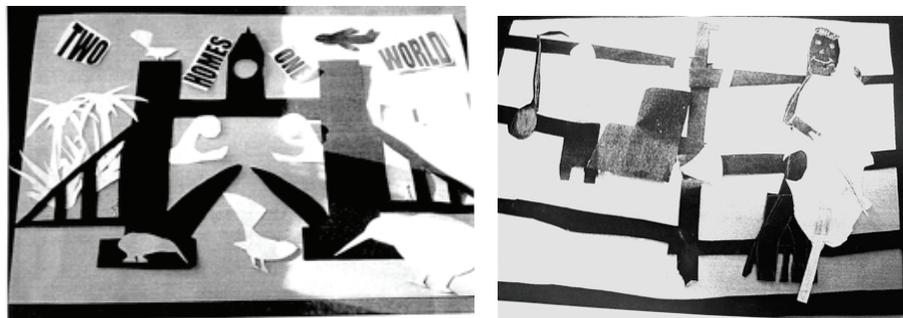
in visual art education. He urges realignment to the commitment to discovery manifesting in contemporary art practices.

### **Formalism in the classroom**

Children engaged with their own creative work are deeply engaged with their intentions and frequently measure the success of their own work against their stories. The intentionalist fallacy suggests we should encourage students to resist basing their response to others' work on an (inferred) artist's intention versus what the work reveals through reflecting on what the work itself tells us. The response is then to what is revealed, rather than what the artist 'was trying to say'.

Paying attention to the so-called 'elements and principles of art' – line, colour, tone, texture, harmony, contrast, tension and so forth – are some of the tools by which internal cohesion of artworks are deemed to be achieved. This formalist approach is officially sanctioned to inform school art production at the primary level within the *New Zealand Arts Curriculum* (MOE, 2000) practical knowledge strand. Langton's research (2002) questioned whether the use of formalist terminology deepens awareness in art production with younger children even though they may develop an emergent understanding of the terms. Our research (Fraser et al., 2006) concurred that formalist language does indeed appear to offer a potential language with which to focus children's attention away from just talking about subject matter and onto how their art is constructed or perceived. However, children's conversations with their peers and discussions of their own or artists' artworks seldom used this formalist lens. This was most evident in the practices of School B.

At School B, after considering how artist Nigel Brown arranged elements in his paintings, students were directed to consider how their motifs were to be arranged on the page through arranging multiple solutions (Figure 7) using tonal collage shapes. Consideration was given to the elements of shape, tone and their effect on the composition, and the figure-ground relationships and cues for depth such as overlapping and scale. Encouraging more than one solution through the use of collage both avoided premature closure and gave conscious encouragement to an intuitive sense of 'rightness of fit' or, as Eisner (1972) would describe it, exercising the faculty of 'aesthetic organising'.



**Figure 7.** *Student composition plans executed in three tone collage, School B*

The challenge of formalist approaches in a classroom context is to make visible and coherent the ‘non-verbal’ decision-making taking place and acquire abstract principles for composition suited to the narrative being explored. Abstract principles such as contrast of tone or shapes, while effectively introducing a foundation for visually selecting a telling narrative, do not achieve the universalism they might assert. One could argue that expecting children at Year 5 level to generalise their art-making by their use of art elements and principles might be akin to attempting to teach abstract algebra before a concrete mastery of addition.

A far more influential guide to their decision-making was grounded in the repeated verbal narratives shared by children as they revealed intentions and interpretations to each other. The often-repeated verbal narrative of ‘what the art is about’ was rarely challenged with a concern for how the visual narrative was told. ‘So that is your story – so how are you going to tell that in a powerfully *visual* way?’ On one rare occasion, however, this challenge was presented by the teacher directly as ‘Don’t tell me – show me.’

### **Discipline-based art education**

Discipline-based art education (DBAE) emerged as an approach that emphasised the 20th century disciplines of art history and art criticism as relevant to the reception of art. Art production in schools was to be now informed by activities associated with adult art reception. Fehr, Keifer-Boyd and Fehr (2000) described the emergence of DBAE:

... a series of studio activities with minimal linkage to art viewing or societal issues – dominated art education in post war 1940s – 50s. In the 1960s Eliot Eisner and others, driven by a blend of noble intent and Getty Center money tinkered with the idea that art education could be defined as a series of disciplines. Their tinkering crystallised into Discipline Based Art Education in the 1980s. (Fehr et al., 2000, p. xiii)

The extension of art production into art reception as an important part of schooling reinforced the formalist procedures for talking about art, focusing on elements and principles as marginalising the social contexts involved in either production or reception.

### **DBAE in the classroom**

In School B, the use of reproductions of Nigel Brown’s artwork (Pearson, 2004) as well as selected interview transcripts allowed children to enter an artist’s world, see his purposes as linked to theirs and see how Nigel had attempted to solve similar pictorial problems arising from combining memory motifs within the one work. They were encouraged to observe his persuasive model closely but given freedom to allow their image to grow in new directions. Even Fehr et al. (2000), as self-confessed cynical postmodernists, conceded that DBAE had benefited art education through making art viewing more important, even though they challenged art

educators to move beyond a safe, predictable canon with potentially sexist, racist and socially privileged biases.

### **Postmodernist challenges**

It is worth acknowledging that there is an unmistakable irony about attempting to characterise postmodernism. Attempts to define postmodernism through the characteristics of artworks are challenged by postmodern art's resistance to typologies. Diverse sets of contemporary approaches commonly emphasise uncertainty, discontinuity, fragmentation, ambiguity and complex interrelations of text and meanings (Gude, 2004). To address postmodernism one must locate postmodernism as a reaction to concepts that were emphasised in the modernism that preceded it. For example, the importance of context was marginalised within preceding expressivist and formalist visions for art education.

For Harrison and Wood (2003), postmodernist theories cluster together around the critique of the myth of originality. 'Copying', 'recycling' and 'quotation' are no longer abhorrent as thought by expressivist and formalist inspired educators. Postmodernist artworks are sometimes recognised by deliberate and ironic use of pastiche. Parsons (1994) pointed out that the universalist and individualist emphasis inside formalist views now sits uneasily with an emergent sensitivity to cultural diversity and a postmodern interest in meaning-making and context. Efland et al. (1996) characterised postmodern art "as a form of cultural production whose purpose is to construct symbols of shared reality. [Artists] recycle content and methods from modern and pre-modern forms of instruction [in order to] promote deeper understandings of the social and cultural landscape" (p. 68).

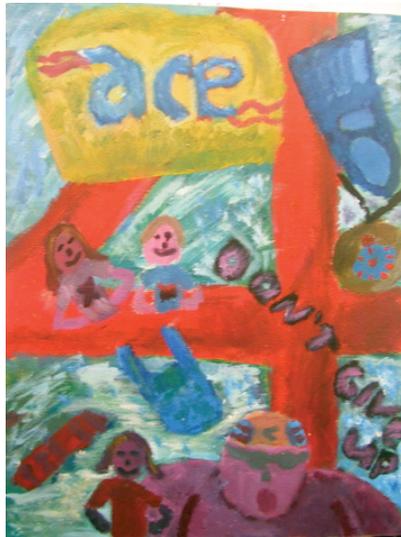
### **Emerging responses in the classroom to postmodernism**

One could ask what constitutes the Year 4 and Year 6 cultural landscapes within *The Art of the Matter* research sample? Both the finished works (Figure 8) and the journey towards them (Figures 1-7), show very different 'experiences' being explored. There is a reassuring diversity of subject matter and technical focus when viewed across schools. But what do they tell us of the sociocultural contexts from which both the children and these works emerge?

The challenge remains how might we recognise and access those visual experiences based on children's investigations of the social and cultural world they actually inhabit, rather than experiences canonically predetermined by teachers and published resources. Duncum (1997), Grierson and Mansfield (2003) and Wilson (2004) have consistently described the spontaneous art activity of the child and the art-worlds experienced in their community as being at variance with the often repeated formulas of school art programmes. The challenge they proffer is to consider how teachers might allow these two worlds to effectively interact.

In School A, the researchers observed that the children had little difficulty in allowing their school world and popular imagery to interact. Popular imagery sources were also available in the classroom and copying cartooning motifs emerged concurrently with the marine study project. John also discovered in the free exploration of 'colour flow' medium while 'playfully' shaking a nozzled ink

bottle like maracas, a series of motifs that had first emerged in his home drawings. In John's drawing of 'Cat' (Figure 9) based on the animation 'Shrek', John transitioned from copying an animation example to a memory drawing at home of the same. He then further improvised at home with inventive 'doodles' around the same theme. These motifs returned to the background of his classroom sea-lion picture (Figure 9) as the stormy effects of an invented zig-zag lightning drama. A strongly proscribed canon with the accompanying force of tradition also existed for medieval draughtsmen. In the places of less importance, the margins and the background, we can often see innovations and playful experimentation where the weight of tradition settles less forcefully.



**Figure 8.** *Sample of finished work from each School: A, B, C*

The teacher followed up the emergence of a few children's home innovations by inviting all students to develop skills outside the prescriptive imagery and process brief of the classroom projects. All students in the following year were

issued with homework sketch books for the term which they were encouraged to use on any sketching they wanted to do in their home environment. There was no requirement to link this to class work themes: it was intended just as a cumulative record of their independent sketching. Nathaniel's work (Figure 10) claims a role for art as legitimised rebellion and an independent imaginative revisiting of the current class theme around cars. His friend reported frequently working collaboratively on a drawing after school, 'He's good at cars, I do the people', thus transgressing the frequently unquestioned art classroom ritual of parallel independent activity. In a portfolio of nearly 50 drawings, Nathaniel explored a variety of themes that satirised, recontextualised and gave individual voice to prescriptive classroom tasks.

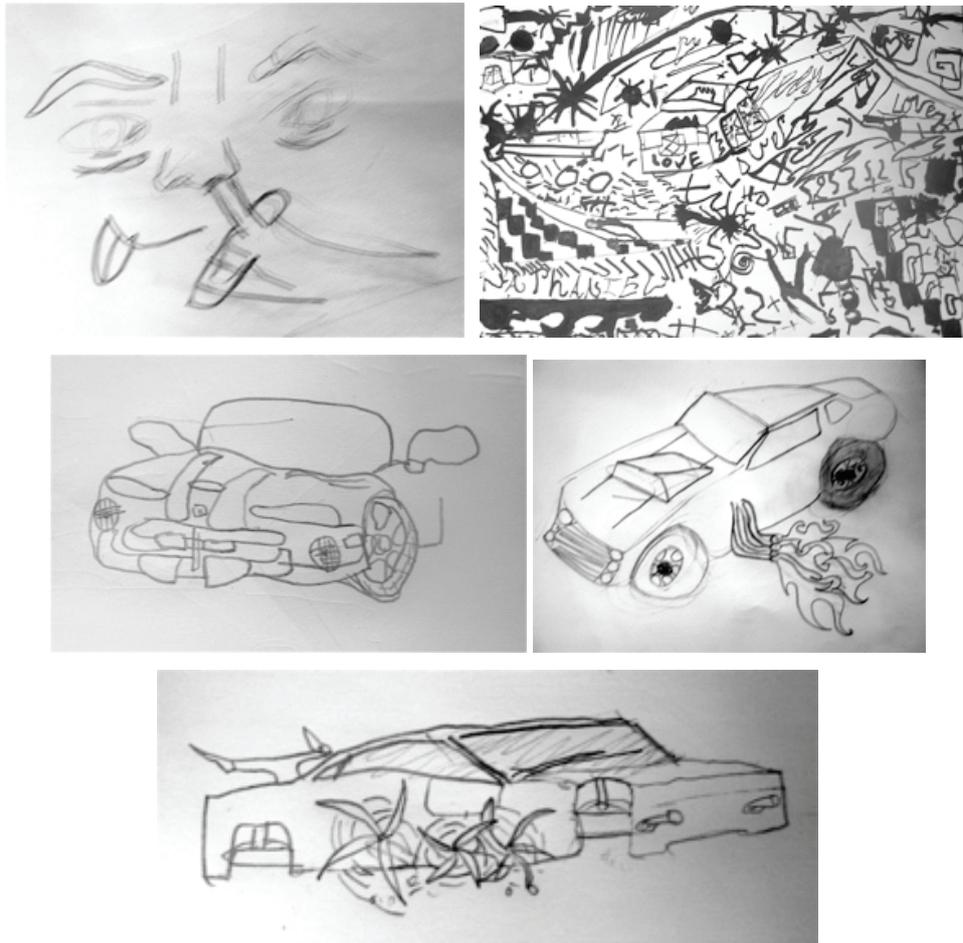


**Figure 9.** *The emergence of cartoon motifs in John's work, School A*

Ironically, this supportive context ultimately produced a challenge to the notion of 'completeness' fostered within the classroom programme. Negotiating the norms and standards of different genre and purposes for drawing, and a student's sense of autonomy is not without difficulty for teachers. A resulting confrontation around teaching expectations for 'finished work' saw the socially complex Nathaniel ultimately removed from the very classroom that had successfully supported his emergence.

The challenge to extend this excursion into contemporary popular art applies to all the classrooms in our research. Rogoff (2003) envisions an education beyond self-expression or the acquisition and compliance with formalist conventions. She challenges institutions to allow the learner to identify his/her own purpose and work in a social collaborative context to investigate his/her cultural contexts while acquiring the cultural tools to do so. Efland (2002) proposed a shift for art education towards an emphasis placed on human agency and meaning-making that contemporary education might recognise. Aesthetic response, while not denied its place, is now presumed "cognitive from the start" (Efland, 2002, p. 171). Meaning is found neither solely by internal coherence (as in formalism), nor solely by the way artworks are used in the social world, (as Marxist or feminist models might suggest), but through students integrating knowledge into their own life-worlds. Efland (2002) considered that this integration of knowledge both occurs and is demonstrated through the arts that explore the imaginative power of metaphor in full consciousness. The contribution of art education moves beyond the

construction of individual stories and becomes, in this view, the development of an understanding of the social and cultural landscape which each individual inhabits. This potentially manifests in a social agenda developing an empathy for, and deeper understanding of, each other beyond the classroom walls.



**Figure 10.** *Nathaniel's independent home activity, School A*

## CONCLUSIONS

Practices in art education are influenced by a synthesis of interests that can be traced to their expression within art theory and general theories of education. In turn, educational theory can be viewed as underpinned by contestable views of the nature of childhood and learning, and societal views of the purposes of schooling. Eisner (1994) recognised that our orientation to curriculum, learning and teaching “serves to legitimise certain educational practices and to negatively sanction others” (p. 71). Within the visual art practices observed within three different schools, we

found programmes were framed by teacher beliefs of what art was, its function and why it should be taught to children.

Hickman (2005) also argues that at primary level, learner-centred approaches need to be “reasserted and woven into recent findings in developmental psychology and the nature of learning” (p. 148). Our theoretical and observation-based findings concur with this view. What goes into the school’s visual culture ‘dress-up box’ still needs to be informed by students’ choice, interests and acknowledgement of their life-worlds. This is not just to capture student interest and ownership but has an ultimate goal of providing relevance to the visual worlds they inhabit. There are multiple art education paradigms at work: mimetic, expressivist, formalist, discipline-based and the postmodern, and it behoves pre-service education to expose teachers to the contestable nature of their beliefs about art. Primary generalist teachers’ praxis aligns fluidly with paradigms that place varying emphasis on what a visual arts idea might be and how it might be developed. The privileging of a mimetic function for art, while it may sit comfortably with populist notions of art and accessibility for teachers and children alike, is not in fact the main function experienced in popular media contemporary visual experiences. Likewise, while children were encouraged and able to use art terminology, this was rarely employed as a conscious tool to refine their work. Teacher-led formal situations stressed the identification and use of terminology rather than its conscious application to solve pictorial problems. Conversations amongst students rarely used formal terminology at all. Common to all successful image building was a prerequisite opportunity to revisit ideas through a sustained focus over time. Structured, repeated opportunities beyond the ‘one off’ experience obviously allow students to go deeper, develop skills and observe the nuances that experimenting with media allowed. We can contrast the teacher’s on-going interest in an emerging, student-directed idea with the dominant educational milieu where planning and assessment is currently atomised and predictive. In a predictive context focused on end-points, the serendipitous and idiosyncratic meaning-making of children can often go unnoticed and unremarked. If teachers and the children pay attention to mute nuances as they tentatively and playfully emerge in their own artwork, we may strengthen children’s sense of who they are and who they may choose to become by valuing their developing choice-making. Art programmes might at least remain ‘child scented’ as students investigate their cultural contexts while acquiring a range of cultural tools to do so.

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