Enriching Early Childhood Education Art Programmes

By Lisa Terreni

To enrich early childhood education art programmes, educators may need to expand their ideas of what an art programme actually involves. A programme which focuses solely on tabletop art activity for children can produce a very narrow focus and limit opportunities for children.

Children, like adults, need a range of visual and sensory experiences to inspire and stimulate their creative potential. Fortunately, the early childhood environment is usually flexible enough in its structure to create opportunities which can expose children to new experiences. However, early childhood staff are crucial in helping children explore what these experiences might be and planning for them to occur.

Developing children’s aesthetic awareness can have enormous impact on the art programme provided by early childhood centres. Feeny and Moravcik in their article *A Thing of Beauty: Aesthetic Development in Young Children* state “Children are fascinated by beauty. They love nature, enjoy creating, looking at and talking about art.” (Young Children, September 1987). Providing opportunities for children to look at and experience art, talk about and discuss art, as well as create art, can broaden the art programme’s focus.

*Exploring framing options with children can extend art programmes and add a new awareness of an aspect of the painting process*
Looking at Art

Julia Cameron, in her book, *The Artist’s Way*, describes the need for individuals to create opportunities for themselves to replenish their own personal creative storerooms. She believes that through exposure to art and creativity we build up ideas and images that we can draw from, in our own unique way, when we wish to create for ourselves. The same can be said for children. Exposing children to art, be it visual, aural or dramatic, gives them new insights and ideas for creativity, especially if this is encouraged and facilitated by their teachers.

*Child engaged in recording her experience at the art gallery by drawing on her personalised clipboard.*

Exposing children to new art experiences can be done in numerous ways. One of the most successful ways of doing this is by organising excursions to art galleries or museums. These excursions can produce a wealth of new ideas and can be the stimulus for new and exciting work.
Teachers need to be familiar with the gallery or museum environment and carefully plan excursions to ensure material is appropriate. Having parents accompany children on an excursion can enhance the experience for both parents and children.

*Children discussing and examining a clay sculpture with their mother at the Dowse Art Gallery*

Including works of art by famous artists on the walls of the centre, particularly near the art area, can also create interesting discussion and opportunities for looking at new ideas in art expressed by these artists. Prints can often be borrowed from libraries. Staff and parents may also be willing to lend work if the reason is explained. Having a work of art as the focus of a group discussion at a mat time or small group session can create exciting debate and generate new ideas.

Books about art and artists can be included in the book corner and discussed with children. Some books have been specifically written with young children
specifically in mind, eg *I Spy* (photos by Walter Wick and riddles by Jean Marzollo, Scholastic 1999) and *Animalia* (written by Graeham Base, Viking Kestrel 1986). Inviting artists, potters, actors, musicians, puppeteers etc into the centre to demonstrate their work can be very motivating for children.

**Talking about Art**

Talking about art naturally comes with looking at art. However it is useful to create opportunities to discuss art with young children when **they are expressing interest in art** or setting up opportunities for art discussions. These are often best in small groups, with an artwork or object as a focus for discussion. One kindergarten set up an installation, created by staff, in the centre of the main mat area. This was changed slightly every day and discussed every morning by the children. Children were not allowed to touch the work (practice for their trip to the art gallery) but encouraged to visually interpret the work and discuss it.

*Installation set up by staff at Wellington South Kindergarten using familiar and unfamiliar objects*
Creating Art

Because children need hands-on, concrete experience to help them process information it is vital that children be given a wide range of opportunities to express themselves creatively. This is particularly important if children have been on trips and exposed to new ideas. They need plenty of opportunities to revisit the experiences through their own creativity.

*Children and teacher discuss a recreation of Mimeko Grimmer's kinetic ice sculpture seen at the Wellington City Art Gallery's Transformers exhibition.*

It can be useful to photograph and/or video excursions or new art experiences so that children can be reminded of them back in the centre and to provide them, if
Art can take place outside just as easily as it can inside. Often children who prefer playing in the outside environment will be drawn to an art activity if it is located outside. Having a designated area for art outside can create exciting opportunities for art that is perhaps bigger or messier than that created inside!
Giving children a greater range of choices about what they can use for their creative process will produce more exciting children’s artwork. Like colouring in books, teachers choosing what children can and cannot use and dictating how they should use it can stifle creativity. A well-resourced and accessible art area is fundamental to any good art programme. Providing a range of natural and non-natural collage materials creates exciting creative opportunities.

*Box construction of Batman with internal organs drawn in felt-tipped pen.*
Exposure to art, and discussion of these experiences, can add new and exciting dimensions to an early childhood art programme. It may require staff to take some risks in their current teaching practice but the results will be worth it!

References


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