

Where the Real Art is

Thoughts on the Visual Arts in the Infant Classroom

In discussing the visual arts curriculum with infant teachers throughout the country, we have been struck by their reports that children in their classes are increasingly using phrases such as “I can’t draw!”, “It doesn’t look like!” and “I don’t like mine!” We have also noted the general comment from infant teachers that children are arriving in schools without many of the simple visual arts skills that in the past we might have taken for granted – holding and using drawing tools, using a paintbrush, cutting, tearing and sticking, etc.

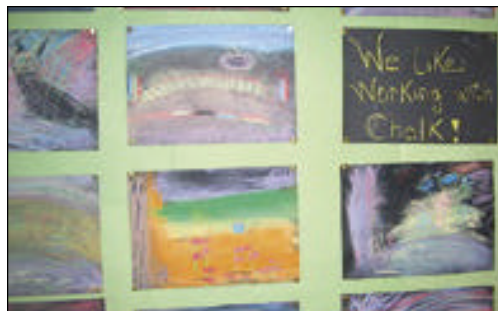
Our own experience as teachers working with the visual arts would have led us to expect that children in late middle classes would develop this very self critical attitude towards their own art. The theory of visual arts education has outlined how children at this age go through the stage of dawning realism, or as it was nicknamed, the ‘I can’t draw stage’. So why now are infants exhibiting all the characteristics of this stage?

We need to analyse what has been happening in recent years that has resulted in this shift. Based on discussions with teachers we might propose the following:

- | that young children are being less exposed to play activities at home that involve paint, clay, drawing, cutting, etc;
- | that many children are attending play schools where they are being given the message that art is all about the production of replicas – more often than not completed by or made entirely by the adult;
- | that many publications purporting to be about visual art also emphasise this notion of replicating a sample;
- | that many textbooks reinforce this notion through the overuse of colouring-in



A good quality dressing-up box



Above: drawing with chalk gives great freedom.
Above right: A wide variety of drawing tools.
Right: Exploring simple art software.



Key Message
Activities that are about mere replication ignore the central message of the visual arts curriculum – that for children the visual arts are a means of communicating their own messages and ideas

- and copying activities;
- | that even the media, in particular some television programmes, reinforce these messages;
- | that possibly we ourselves have been sucked into this

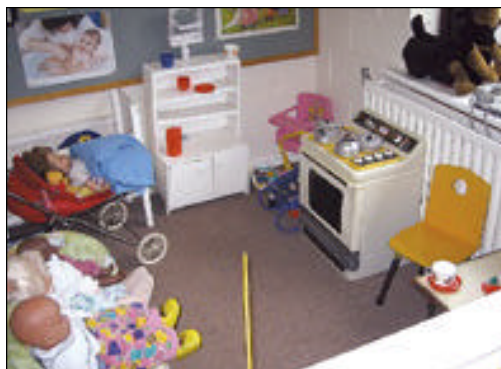
- mindset and left feeling that our role as the teacher is to accumulate samples for the children to recreate;
- | that the basic message to children is that their own art is no good because it doesn't

- look like an adult generated product.
- Perhaps it's time that we took a look at the amount of visual art activity that happens in our classrooms on a daily basis – rather than focusing on trying

to find 'ideas' to fit into that specific time slot on our timetable allocated to art and craft. Many of the following activities happen when children are engaged in 'playtime' and are working in groups – but might in the past not have been seen as pertaining to visual arts, but to other subject areas – maybe we need to think again?

Consider the following:

- | **Drawing** – can be integrated with any other subject area on the curriculum and can be used as a response to other arts areas such as music, as indeed can painting activities.
- | **Sand and water play** – encourage awareness of texture and line.
- | **Handwriting activities** – many handwriting activities encourage exploration of drawing materials, playing with line and shape and developing an awareness of the elements of art e.g. line.
- | **ICT work** – encourages the exploration of line, shape and colour, if we use basic software and avoid clipart, another example of adult generated art.
- | **Blackboards** – working with chalks on small boards gives children lots of opportunity to practice drawing and avoids the idea of the completed final permanent product.
- | **Sorting activities** – sorting for shape, colour, size, texture etc develops awareness of all the art elements.
- | **Threading activities** – develop awareness of colour, pattern and rhythm.
- | **Colour collections** – develop awareness of colour.
- | **Write-a-book projects** – enabling children to use their own art as illustrations for group big story books with the teacher acting as scribe integrates well with the language curriculum.
- | **Rubbings** – providing interesting collections to rub over develops awareness of texture and colour.
- | **Found objects** – making a collection of interesting objects that can be used for all kinds of printing develops



- an awareness of colour and pattern.
- | **Stamp pads** – having a collection of commercial pads or making your own using sponges and inks in airtight containers allows free exploration of printing possibilities.
- | **Plasticine and play dough** – are materials allied to clay and develop awareness of form.
- | **Tearing, cutting and sticking** – providing children with lots of different types of scrap papers, magazines, etc and allowing them to work freely with these develops basic skills.
- | **Construction toys** – providing a wide range of these, and throwing away the boxes, allows children to freely explore building and balancing and develops awareness of shape and space.
- | **Play corner** – provides children with all kinds of opportunities to explore space and to arrange objects in space
- | **Jigsaws** – develop awareness of colour, line and shape, try making your own with your own pieces of art.
- | **Feely boxes** – having children sort pieces of fabric by touch develops awareness of texture.
- | **Dressing up activities** –



Clockwise from top left: Invest in a wide variety of construction games/toys. Emphasise active looking on outings. Look at the work of artists in big books. Play corners rock!



stages is vital eg tell us about what you have built? Tell us what character you have dressed up as? etc.

Note
On second thoughts, all of the above doesn't just apply to infant classes, but to visual art work throughout the school!

Compiled by the visual arts team of the Primary Curriculum Support Programme. For further ideas visit our website at www.pcsp.ie. Also check out the new NCTE/RTE site at www.iamanartist.ie

Photographs courtesy of Maureen Dowling, Noreen Feely and staff in St Kieran's NS for Traveller Children, Bray, Co Wicklow.

