



Art in Early Childhood

Book Review

by Rosemary Richards

THE STORY IN THE PICTURES: INQUIRY AND ARTMAKING WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

By Christine Mulcahey,

Forward by Maxine Greene.

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This hundred-page book, which is part of the Early Childhood Education Series, is 'about providing early childhood teachers, preservice teachers, parents, and caregivers the skills, and the freedom, to design rich and open-ended art experiences for young children. It focuses on looking at the work of various artists and ways to use these artworks as taking off points for conversations and creativity with a range of materials' (Mulcahey, 2009, p. xi). To a large extent I believe that this book accomplishes what it sets out to do, not by providing recipe type approaches to art lessons, but by sharing the author's interactions with young children as they explored the work of artists and the children generated their own artworks.

The book, which is based on Christine's actual art experiences with young children, is structured into six chapters. Each chapter is supported by black and white photographs of children at work or children's artwork. There are also ten plates but unfortunately, as these are also in monochrome, they add little to the overall book. I feel sure that the lack of colour would have been a publisher's choice rather than the author's.

The first chapter addresses the question, 'Why teach through art?' and introduces the rationale for using artworks in an early childhood curriculum. Clear links are made to the value of promoting aesthetic experience as a sense of wonder that enriches child's lives on several levels. Thus, when the children explore the elements of artworks, such as line, colour and shape, there is clearly a broader understanding of how this relates to 'thinking like an artist' - something that young child are capable of and should be encouraged to do. This initial chapter sets the tone for the remainder of the book in

terms of celebrating art, children's artistic capabilities and aesthetic experiences.

The second chapter deals with Mulcahey's version of 'dos and don'ts' in early childhood art education and considers some of the contentious issues such as the value of colouring-in books, the impact of tracing, the pitfalls of unstructured open-ended activities or teacher directed closed activities. While I am not in strict agreement with all of Mulcahey's points this chapter is well supported and makes reference to her own experience with children. This section includes a useful and succinct discussion on the features of a 'rich' art activity that practitioners will find helpful when considering the value of various early childhood art activities.

The next three chapters deal with talking with children about art, actual lessons and concepts of art in the early childhood curriculum. These chapters have a pleasant narrative style which made them eminently readable and I am sure teachers and students will gain a great deal from these discussions. Christine Mulcahey shares with the children, and the reader her enthusiasm and talents as a teacher, an artist and a researcher. However, it is not her voice that dominates the book – rather the children's comments and images that weave a tale of exploration and artistic development. I found many gems of real experience wisdom in these chapters that align with my personal views on interaction with young children through art education. These gems are often couched as forms of inquiry that also encourage the reader to stop and consider their own beliefs before reading the author's view. For example, on the topic of talking with children and complimenting Christine writes:

Children often come up and ask me, "Do you like it?" I stop, look, and reply, "Do you like it?" They look at their artwork again, and usually answer yes. When children do this, are they really looking for compliments? What is it they are really looking for? I believe that they are looking for us to attend to their work, not necessarily compliment it. The complimenting does not always engage the child in a conversation. It can be a one-word answer (p. 34).

Thus, while this book was written from the experience of the Northern hemisphere, it does have relevance to art education approaches in elsewhere. For example, in New Zealand our early childhood curriculum, *Te Whariki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) is based on sociocultural perspectives. Therefore, while a consideration of children's interest, needs and skills is of paramount importance I also encourage teachers to bring 'themselves' into the children's art experience so that children and adults can co-construct knowledge and understanding. and I encourage my preservice teachers to consider ways in which they are not only 'active' early years' art educators but interactive ones. However, it has been difficult to find a range of real life examples of effective adult-child interactions within art education practices. Therefore, I am delighted that in this book Christine's approach to art education brings to life such interactions as well as providing concrete examples of children's ability to respond to their visual worlds. Furthermore, Christine gives the clear impression that she gains as much from interacting with the children as they gain from the process. Her style of writing, and her 'pointers' for the reader, makes these interactions transparent for others and opens up ways for other teachers to think and act as art educators. Therefore this book, which honours the children's perspectives while also honouring the role of teachers, sits well with sociocultural and Vygotskian perspectives on pedagogy.

I can appreciate that a small book such as this cannot cover every aspect fully so there are additional challenges I would put to New Zealand early childhood art educators. For example, the book's focus on looking at and responding to the artwork of artists is also one aspect of our art education curriculum. However, while responding to the visual images made by others can be a powerful learning tool and a valid art experience, I believe that this approach should also lead onto children sharing their own perspectives of the world in terms of the big ideas that they explore. This may well happen in Christine's classrooms but it is not highlighted in this book. Also, with regards to understanding what motivate artists, Mulcahey comments that if young children want further information about the artist or the painting they will usually ask. However, I would lean towards a more proactive engagement in this aspect as it can be empowering for the children to have some understanding of the artist's intentions and motivations as this could help children to think like artists and lead to discussion and artworks based on the children's own big ideas. I am in agreement with Mulcahey that discussions about artworks can celebrate diversity as, and 'being knowledgeable in the visual arts helps both children and adults be more open-minded and accepting of differences in many areas' (p.6).

On a related issue Mulcahey comments that she uses adult art work in preference to children's artworks. Her book illustrates how effective her approach is. However, the New Zealand Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education, 2007) for schools specifically encourages young children at school to 'comment about their own and others artworks'. Furthermore, this is an approach that I encourage with younger children and tertiary students. I find that the art works of the student's peers can be particularly poignant in terms of highlighting those issues that are of common interest amongst children and within communities. This also provides a window into the topics, themes and big ideas that children are exploring on a wider basis, such as at home.

I believe that it is important that educators find ways to bridge home and school art experience. Therefore, I was pleased to see that the book concludes with a chapter that considers aspects of this. It mostly deals with the need to 'educate parents, caregivers, and families about methods to extend' children's art learning at home (p. 78). However, there was little serious consideration of how children's home-based art experiences can be recognized or extended in the educational settings. This is one aspect of bridging home and school experiences that needs further consideration.

Overall this book has much to commend it. This book is not only timely but hopefully seminal in encouraging other teachers and research to share their approaches to interactive art education in the early years. Christine Mulcahey as an artist, educator and researcher brings together an honouring of art and of children. Through the sharing of practical examples she illustrates that 'not all art activities need to be dependent on areas of the curriculum. There is a body of art knowledge that can be explored on its own' (p. 57). While I agree with the sentiment I find this statement intriguing as the underlying message is that art is not a curriculum area. Indeed it is and we should not be afraid to say as much and to be art educators.

Refernces:

Ministry of Education. (1996). Te Whariki Early Childhood Curriculum. He Whariki Matauranga mo nga Mokopuna o Aotearoa. Wellington, New Zealand: Learning Media.

Ministry of Education. (2007). The New Zealand Curriculum Framework. Retrieved 31/03/2008, from http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/the_new_zealand_curriculum

Mulcahey, C. (2009). The story in the pictures: Inquiry and artmaking with young children. New York and London: Teachers College Press, Columbia University and National Art Education Association