

Painting with infants: A meaning and connection making experience

by Jannie Visser



As soon as I picked up the latest copy of The First Years: Ngā Tau Tuatahi journal (Volume 9, Issue 1) my eye and interest were drawn to Hannah Ana Eichler's (2007) article on 'Painting with infants?'. Firstly, because infant/toddler art and art education has been a personal and professional passion for many years; and secondly because the article's title was framed as a question rather than a statement. The latter implied that here was an author who intended to raise issues rather than provide answers; an inference substantiated in the article's summary. Thus, I hoped that this article would contribute to a discourse regarding infant/toddler care and education that is not often heard, but long overdue.



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Focusing primarily on one particular art form, namely painting, Eichler questioned the value of the art medium of paint in the infant's art learning process, because of its potential risk to infants' health and cognitive and sensori-motor development. She challenged infant teachers to "strive to provide the best possible care and resources... [to ensure] that our educational practices are doing no harm" (2007, p. 28). Acknowledging the importance of art and art education as well as of high quality infant/toddler care and education, I would now like to respond to some of the issues and challenges raised around 'painting with infants', in particular the question whether painting is an important activity for infants.

The diverse perspectives of art and art education

Over the years the interconnected notions of art, of the child as artist and of the role of art in children's learning and development, have been strongly debated. The diverse perspectives of art as a vehicle

of independent discovery and exploration (a developmental perspective); as a form of emotional release and self-expression (a psychoanalytical viewpoint); or as a language or symbol system (a constructivist and socio-constructivist notion) have led to various and contrasting art education curricula and pedagogies. Orientations have ranged from the child-initiated, 'little-intervention' method, to one focused on discreet, teacher-directed art production outcomes, to the guided-exploration approach (Bae, 2004).

Eichler's notion of the infant, of infant art and art learning appears to be primarily embedded within the 'little intervention' perspective, which has been strongly influenced by normative developmental and creativity-based theories. These theories consider infants to be independent explorers of their surrounding environment and resources, and emphasise that artistic growth and development is a naturally unfolding and linear process. The very young child's involvement in initial mark making is seen as an "aesthetic and sensual pleasure in the activity itself" (Ben-Shaul, 2001, p. 3), however meaningless in terms of expression and communication. Eichler argues likewise, namely that infants are not interested in "painting an object such as a bird or a tree" or in "expressing feelings artistically" (p. 27), but rather in painting as an exploratory, sensory and aesthetic activity and "a kind of heuristic play" (p. 27).

Sensory learning

Sensory learning has long been viewed as an important contributor to children's growth and development. In the Froebelian kindergarten classroom, for instance, children were encouraged to use attentive observation and manipulation of such objects as knitted and wooden balls; wooden cylinders and cubes; and seeds, beans and pebbles to learn about shapes,

textures and colours. These perceptual and kinaesthetic experiences were seen as crucial, firstly, because, as Froebel argued, "Although the very young child may be physically helpless, he was very aware of his immediate environment and learned much more than adults supposed" (cited in Sienkiewicz, 1985, p. 130). Secondly, because these early experiences were vital as a precursor for later art development and learning. Sensory experiences however are as important for adults as they are for children. Through interactions with the sensory environment, both adult and child develop knowledge and understanding of the way materials, objects, and people work (Gardner, 1990). This knowledge and understanding form the foundation for the creative expressions of ideas that follow. Thus, sensory exploration, creativity and symbolic representation do not happen in isolation or as progressive steps in artistic development, but are in fact intertwined and an integral part of the meaning making process (Wright, 2003a). In early childhood art education, both adults and children play a vital role in this process: the children by "explor[ing] media, invent[ing] their own forms, and ... express[ing] ideas and feelings that they deem important" (Gardner, 1990, p. x); the adults by "making explicit the meaning of the children's activity [and] echoing their discoveries" (Galardini & Giovannini, 2001, p. 97). In view of that, any art medium, including paint is much more than a mere substance to explore and in fact becomes a social tool.

Paint and art as a social and cultural tool

Art, including paint, however does not only have a place in children's socialisation process but also in their enculturation. This was acknowledged by Gordon Tovey who was cited by Eichler in order to draw attention to the very young child's learning style in contrast to older children's ways of working in art. Exploration of media rather than pictorial representation was the young infant's objective. By primarily focusing on Tovey's statement regarding the normative developmental notions of universality, sequential progression, and creative self-expression in art, Eichler appeared to have overlooked the importance Tovey attached to children having knowledge and understanding of their social and cultural environment



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to ensure optimal art development and learning (Smith, 1996). Enculturation is a process that starts as soon as a child enters the world, and arguably even before this, and is enhanced by adults' responsiveness and reciprocity. Thus teaching strategies needed to respond to children's backgrounds and individual strengths, needs and dispositions.

Teachers' responsiveness to the infant's needs was also considered crucial by Eichler. However this was seen in terms of providing sensory and gross motor activities to ensure optimal cognitive development. Concerns were expressed that the use of paint in infant care and education and infants' free exploration of this medium may act as a barrier to cognitive development. It was argued that paint's unpleasant taste may "stop children from future explorations with their mouths" (p. 26), as well as prevent infants from practising their gross motor skills. Apart from the fact that it is quite difficult to stop an infant from sensory exploration, an effective infant curriculum should provide and encourage infants' holistic learning and development through a whole spectrum of learning experiences, of which gross motor activities and painting form significant but not sole parts. Within this argument, there are two, arguably interconnected, aspects that I would like to respond to, namely the fact that the notion of 'the infant' is not clearly identified in the article and the notion of paint as a mere vehicle for exploration in infancy (the latter has already been touched on in the previous paragraphs).

Paint is not for eating

As the author quite rightly pointed out, paint is not meant to be ingested; rather, paint, in its most basic function, is used to cover an object or surface with colours. Different types of paints will produce different results with regard to finish, vibrancy and quality of colours. Most if not all early childhood educators will be aware of the differing results tempera and acrylic paints produce. However, they may not be aware that these outcomes are dependent on the pigments and binders that make up the type of paint. It is these colouring and coalescent substances, such as acrylic polymer and mono propylene glycol, that underpin Eichler's justified concerns about the potential risk to 'mouthing' infants when paints are eaten. It is interesting to note, however, that nowhere in the article Eichler defines what she means by 'an infant'.

In the New Zealand early childhood education curriculum document *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) 'the infant' is described as a child between birth to 18 months of age. The characteristics of children within this age range vary widely as do their needs, interests, strengths and capabilities. Consequently, the role of art and of art learning and teaching will also vary. The main 'task' of the infant is to develop a sense of trust and belonging in the world around him or her in order to thrive and learn (Ministry of Education, 1996). Meaningful and responsive support systems are paramount in this trust-building process consisting of adults who are in tune with the child as well as with the

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cultural contexts familiar to the child. Art and art education for the very young infant will primarily consist of the adult sharing infants' sense of wonder and excitement as they first come into contact with their cultural and social environments. While the child is sitting in a comfortable lap, the responsive and sensitive adult may draw the young infant's attention to the bright colours of the kowhaiwhai patterns on the heke in the whare whakairo; the earthy tones in the tapa cloth or the multifarious colours in a Pamela Wolfe poster on the wall, while at the same time describing the meanings behind the colours, patterns and designs. Delight can furthermore be shared with the adult and infant observing other children engaged in painting and other art experiences. Through these joint attention experiences, art learning and teaching becomes part of the child's attachment as well as socialisation and enculturation processes. Older, more mobile infants will want to discover the power of paint for themselves. While engaging with paint in art creation, they will be able to draw on the sociocultural knowledges, values and beliefs they have previously encountered. Mark making and meaning making go hand in hand at this stage. Through independent as well as guided exploration the child will learn "skills and techniques to enable them to express their own ideas better than they might on their own" (Wright, 2003b, p. 158). The infant from birth is thus provided with opportunities to learn about their social and cultural values, beliefs and aspirations, and what is and is not appropriate within their specific socio-cultural context. In this way, infants will also learn that paint is not for eating (just as children will learn that food is not

for playing with - a viewpoint not in line with Eichler's suggested alternatives to paint).

Conclusion

This article was written in response to HannahAna Eichler's questioning the value of the art medium of paint in infant care and education, partly because of its potential risk to infants' health, and partly because of a perceived barrier to infants' sensori-motor and cognitive development and learning. It was argued that Eichler's notion of the infant, of infant art and art learning appeared to be embedded within normative developmental and creativity-based theories, in which infants are described as independent explorers and discoverers of their surrounding world. Art in this context is seen as a vehicle for this exploration and discovery rather than a social and cultural tool, an assertion made by the author of this article. Rather than teachers' non-intervention in the natural course of the child's artistic development, it has been argued that the teacher's role in infant art education is a more active and supportive one with adults sharing an infant's sense of wonder and excitement as they first come into contact with their cultural and social environments. Overall, the role of the infant art teacher at any of the infant stages will be that of meaning and connection making as well as creating opportunities for shared learning about the use of the cultural tools and images of their society (Musatti & Mayer, 2001).

These sociocultural encounters form an integral part of creative expression, aesthetic sensitivity and symbolisation. Art is indeed the most sublime form of play

as argued by Froebel (cited in Sienkiewicz, 1985). However art and art education at any age should ensure that children develop knowledge and understanding of their social and cultural contexts.

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