

Teachers' and Mothers' Perceptions of Using Creative Arts to Develop Children's Potential for Critical Thinking

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Abstract: Using a qualitative naturalistic, interpretive design, this study sought to investigate the impact of children's participation in a creative arts project on the development of critical thinking dispositions. Focus groups and individual interviews were undertaken to identify mothers' and teachers' perceptions of children's critical thinking development in the context of creating an art piece. Data were analysed using a thematic analysis. The findings revealed that creative arts participation was able to excite children's imagination and mobilise creativity leading to an increased awareness of self and others, including the environment around them. Teachers believed children required more time for free play to develop their imagination, while mothers perceived that time and curriculum constraints reduced children's opportunities for integration of arts into their other studies. These findings have important implications for the development of future education curricula in addition to the development of collaborative initiatives between schools and community organisations.

Keywords: Creative Arts, Critical Thinking, Barriers to Creativity, Mobilisation of Imagination, Community Connection and Engagement

INTRODUCTION

The concept of critical thinking is derived from the three basic analytical dimensions of logic, criteria and pragmatism, from which a child can develop precise intellectual and emotional judgment. In practice, critical thinking is the ability to assess the authenticity, accuracy, and/or worth of knowledge claims and arguments through careful, precise, persistent and objective analysis of any knowledge claim or belief (Ennis 1991, 1996). Critical thinking dispositions develop through art as students engage in the act of developing unique, individualised solutions to solving aesthetic problems (Eisner 1998). Therefore, aesthetics and learning are inexorably linked to how we perceive and make decisions about the world around us (Dewey 1934; Eisner 1985; Read 1943).

Analysis of all types of knowledge requires critical thinking. Education is multidimensional and fosters the development of knowledge and understanding in a range of disciplines that can be further enhanced when infused with the arts (Deasy et al. 2002; Richmond 2009; Robinson 2009; Smithrim and Upitis 2005). Art fulfils the psychological need for sense, imagination, feeling, spontaneity, language judgment and self-awareness (Efland 2004; Richmond 2009; Reid 1985). The aim of this paper is to report on a study that identified critical thinking dispositions and abilities in a cohort of primary school aged children, having been exposed to a creative arts activity. It is based on the contention that the arts can develop strengths in critical thinking (Efland 1990, 1996, 2004; Eisner 1985; Lowenfeld and Brittain 1970) and is distinct

from other literature in the field, which has focused predominantly on the development of critical thinking in secondary and tertiary aged students. The findings, derived from a naturalistic, interpretive study method, are issues of real-world significance, which will appeal to policy makers, and planners concerned with future education curriculum and the development of community-generated arts activities. The paper will provide a background to the relevance of the study and discuss briefly the methodological approach including sample and access, data collection and analysis, in addition to providing an overview of how the theoretical framework guided the study. An in depth discussion is provided alongside the findings, and is supported by selected data. The paper concludes with recommendations for implications and further research.

Background

Expansion of the arts in schools has been recommended by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (2011) (ACARA), indicating a greater awareness of the role of arts in children's cognitive development. This national initiative also reflects the widespread understanding that cognitive skills develop in the early years concurrent with the development of other skills such as mobility, emotion and communication (Vygotsky 1962). However, despite the policy commitment to increase arts education in Australian school curricula the positioning of the arts within schools is currently variable with some children receiving little exposure in this area. The impact of exposing young children to creative arts and the subsequent development of critical thinking dispositions and attributes, along with the environments that nurture aptitudes and attitudes toward critical thinking is an under researched area. Understanding the mechanisms of how creative arts impact on the cultural, social and economic aspects of community life is of critical importance to policy makers and planners, schools and tertiary education institutions and community arts organisations. Consequently the authors' aim was to explore mothers' and teachers' perspectives of the development of critical thinking in a group of young school children, aged 8–9 years old, participating in the Mandurah Stretch Festival (Festival) in Western Australia, managed by the City of Mandurah (City).

Methodology

As an interpretive study, the research was designed to identify and interpret perceptions and meanings arising from arts activities in the context of children's critical thinking development. The study was guided by the Super-Streamlined Concept of Critical Thinking Framework (SSCCTF) (Ennis 2010), which was used in the study to assist with the interpretation of relevant literature, link the study to previous knowledge, develop the semi-structured interview questions, reference the findings and validate the significance of the research. The SSCCTF frames an analysis of decision-making processes and character dispositions and abilities required "to decide what to believe or do", and to identify the dispositions and abilities of the ideal critical thinker (Ennis 1991, 6). The aim was to explore participants' views on the children's use of imagination, decision-making and problem solving as they developed and reflected on their art and shared their ideas with others.

The Sample and Access

Following approval from Murdoch University Human Research Ethics Committee and the Western Australian Department of Education Evaluation and Accountability Office, the three primary schools (one private and two government) and an Independent Art Group (IAG) participating in the Festival were approached to recruit the participants for the study. Each school was assigned an artist-in-residence by the City, with the aim of engaging the students, teachers and artists in a creative partnership. The sample consisted of voluntary participants comprising

both teachers and artists-in residence involved in facilitating the students' artwork development and mothers of the children involved in the art projects.

Data Collection

The research question explored through the focus group and interview discussion was: How does creative art influence the development of critical thinking in a cohort of children between eight and nine years, living in the Peel region? Data consisted of first hand observations and teachers' and mothers' self-reported perceptions regarding children's critical thinking development through the creative arts experience. Focus groups were conducted to encourage genuine discussion among participants (McLafferty 2004), whilst providing an opportunity to probe for opinions or attitudes at a deeper level. Unstructured observations in this context permitted the co-construction of knowledge between researcher and the participants (Mulhall 2003). Each school and the IAG contributed an individual creative art piece to display at the Festival in line with the 2010 theme 'Lifestyles and Imagination'. The art pieces were displayed in the City's Mall and the Performing Arts Centre and depicted historical features of the city such as the Sontoy Ballroom, the Mandurah Movie Theatre and the Smart Street Mall, which was the city's hub during the 1950's. Additional indicators of arts activities included a DVD of video footage and still photographs contributed by one private school and letters written by students from one of the government schools.

Data from two focus groups and four individual interviews were gathered in June 2010, at the end of the Festival. One group consisted of two full time teachers and one artist-in-residence who had been involved in directing the art activity and the other of five mothers of the children participating in the creative art activity. A further four individual interviews were conducted with two teachers and two mothers who were unable to attend the focus groups. Discussions explored their perceptions about the development, display and engagement generated by the art activities, with particular dispositions and abilities that were linked to critical thinking.

Data Analysis

Interpretive analysis of the data was implemented using the computer-based program, Artichoke™ (Fetherston 2007). Both the video and audio files were entered into the database. The framework of familiarization, identifying a thematic framework, indexing, charting, mapping and interpretation was followed (Srivastava and Thomson 2009). Familiarisation with the data was achieved in Artichoke™ Analyse and by frequently listening to the tape-recorded interviews and watching the video footage. Recurrence, repetition and forcefulness were the three points of reference used to identify themes (Overcash 2004). Data were indexed using the codes application in Artichoke™ by sifting, highlighting and sorting out quotes and making comparisons to represent relationships between levels of coding in the analysis (King and Horricks 2010). Charting, mapping and interpreting were conducted by taking quotes from their original context and rearranging them under the newly developed thematic framework.

Findings and Discussion

Themes and sub-themes generated from the analysis are presented in Table 1. Supporting evidence in the form of verbatim quotes from interviews and letters written by students is presented below.

Table 1: Themes and Sub-Themes Generated from Teachers’ and Mothers’ Perceptions of Children’s Creative Arts Experiences

Themes	Sub-Themes
1. Environmental factors influencing children’s creativity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Constraining factors limiting the creative arts experience in the home. • Limited time allocation for creative arts in school programs. • The lack of creative arts expert instruction across the span of the school curriculum. • Funding restrictions in the educational environment.
2. Processes in mobilising children’s creativity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being given “permission” by teachers. • Factors mobilising children’s creativity. • Providing children with creative arts opportunities outside of the limited school programs. • Strategies in working with children to excite their imagination.
3. Children growing through the experience of creative arts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children becoming aware of themselves through creativity. • Children extending their awareness to others and the environment around them.
4. Children developing confidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connecting the creative process to other subjects. • Children confidently talking about the construction of their work and defending their choices. • Visible indicators of problem solving in the development of their work. • Persevering with the task to obtain the desired results and effects.
5. Children’s creativity contributing to community vibrancy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taking pride in the contribution they have to offer to a community event. • Feeling a sense of belonging and connection to the community through art.

Environmental Factors Influencing Children’s Creativity

Teachers were concerned that many pre–primary and primary aged children today, appear to not readily display imaginative dispositions that would enable them to generate original ideas or thoughts. Their perceptions suggest that initially the children are passive to pursuing purpose, problem solving, decision–making and imaginative processes. The teachers explained this passivity on the basis that children in their early years are not being exposed to enough free–play in both their homes and pre–primary education settings:

I really think that play is a big part of it...it’s their play at home. A lot of that talking and creative play and finding out those things...there’s not that kind of learning any more... there is not that kind of outlet to just go down the street or find a bit of bush or something like that and play...it’s quite structured...they’ll go to someone’s home or might be in front of the play station. It’s not the same anymore, just easy imagination...you have to drag it out of them a lot more. I think that before when there was a free structure of play it was easier (T3).

Teachers commented that education in pre–primary and early primary focuses on formal education, rather than allowing children to develop attributes of creativity and imagination:

Play has been taken away in pre–primary, breaking away from the traditional teaching and that's where you get these kids coming in that have already started formal learning and they should really still be playing...still be using their imagination...and that's where it's wrong...I really disagree with it...I don't think it helps the children socially...they haven't developed that background...I don't think teachers were ever asked whether children should start formal learning earlier. I spoke to some of the kindy teachers earlier this year and they also feel that there is not enough time to free play (T1).

This finding is important in relation to other research (Boddy and Cartmel 2011), which has found that children's creative play is fundamental in the development of personal power, and if this is cultivated in early life, they are more likely to have self–initiating behaviours and a capacity for inventiveness when adults.

Mothers perceived that curriculum and time restraints on creative arts activities reduced the children's experiences to enable full engagement in thoughtful and reflective practices. They also believed that arts activities were supported in the pre–primary and early primary years and then forgotten until the secondary years where the arts were elective, but only to those considered to have ability:

You know that saying...a picture paints a thousand words...it's true and that's what the kindy kids are learning...pictures mainly and that's how they learn...they experience...they talk and so on...why is that not followed through to the higher levels...they've lost it along the way, it's a real shame...I wonder what has happened to that link from lower levels...some brains need it, they see things differently...it hasn't been followed through...they are not giving it the same attention as Maths, English, Sport (M1).

I hope they maximise the use of it (creative arts) eventually...not every child is sporty or an academic...art is another avenue for the children or all of them to express themselves in different ways and I'm just so for it (M1).

Mothers also believed that arts in the curriculum were just 'fillers' in relation to the academic subjects and that the product of the art work appeared to be more important than the process:

They are taught from an early age...they have portfolios that they have to take home...the teacher keeps saying how important it is that they must look fantastic...I think the children lose a bit of their own interpretation...the teacher says 'it's going into your portfolio, it's got to look good'...their own interpretation is lost (M4).

The product approach was of major concern as both teachers and mothers proposed that the children bypassed the process, only to produce a result that pleases someone else. This emerged from discussions regarding their perceptions of the children's decision–making and representation skills:

There was an activity that our children did in pre–primary and it stands out in my head for a particular reason...the teacher got them to draw a self–portrait...and they couldn't do it, a lot of them were stick figures etcetera...some teachers can't draw much better than that because no one has taught them how to do it (M8).

These findings are supported by others (McArdie and Piscitelli 2002; Orbeck 2004) who suggest that most teachers do not have the skills base to teach the foundation of art practice and

therefore stick to what they refer to as the 'bag of tricks' which produces many pieces of 'multiple sameness' found on classroom walls:

It comes down to the teachers...some teachers are not arty, so they don't like to teach it...if you have a child who has had a few teachers that aren't arty and don't particularly like it then they are more inclined to not understand it as much or get exposed to it as much (M4).

It has been acknowledged that while the arts has been identified in Australia as one of the key eight learning areas, particularly in primary school, generalist beginning-teachers struggle to provide effective arts education due to poor arts backgrounds (Dinham 2007).

Both groups of participants decried the low priority given to funding for the arts, including the lack of purpose built facilities with appropriate facilitators and funding for projects. Inequity in affordability of community creative arts programs was also reported:

There is no funding...very few schools have got specialised art teachers...very few schools have even got a wet area where they can do art work...you know...I've had to go out into the yard and do it...and sometimes there has been no running water and we've had to bucket it (T5).

She (daughter) was also part of another (extracurricular) art class...it is a lovely feel good group...it's a wonderful community thing...interestingly enough it's probably the same type of children that are doing it...if you want to talk about socioeconomic groups that are doing it...it's probably that...because it is about \$120 a term, so that's another issue that limits the arts...limits people from accessing it (M7).

This supports comments made by Sir Ken Robinson (2009) who has reported his distress about the hierarchal education system that positions mathematics and science at the top and arts and the humanities at the bottom of the priority list. However, extracurricular programs are expensive and possibly out of reach for many Australian families, despite recognition of their value in children's motivation, self-discovery, context and meaningful learning.

Processes in Mobilising Children's Creativity

Teachers reported not only a passiveness in the children, but an initial reluctance to display autonomy to develop their own ideas. These children required 'permission' to begin to use their imaginations and think freely:

They say that they have to do a brown cow, they have to do a black and white zebra, they can't do a purple zebra...not in all cases...but they say to me that they are not allowed to do this and they are not allowed to do that and so when they come here and especially when they first start and they are very timid to really express, to take the chance of using that different colour because they are scared I'm going to tell them off...A child will come up and say 'am I allowed to do this...could I cut this, this way?'...I say...'you can do anything you want...that is your art work...you are the artist...this comes from you...this comes from inside'...'Oh!'...they say...'I won't get in trouble?'...that's the big one...'I won't get in trouble?'...It's giving them permission (T4).

The findings suggest that when children operate in convergent (restrictive) thinking environments, where they are taught to conform to specific ideas, they will often 'shut down' to protect their creative integrity. In particular, the findings suggest that children's creative impulses are squashed by rejection, criticism, failure or pressure to conform:

The children are caught in a box...they can't get out and do what they really want to do...or be who they are...or have the emotions that they really want to have and be expressive...they think that people will laugh at them...they don't think it looks right...and then after a while...it takes quite a lot of time for them to let go...I tell them...'you are allowed to express yourself, you are allowed to do different things'...they just have to keep checking...they ask...'can we put a belt on, can we put a headband on, would it be alright if we had a stick like this'...I always say 'Yes!'...If they make a mistake, I tell them to always 'use your mistakes, use your mistakes to your advantage' (T4).

It's the expectation that the parents want but...that's the worst part, saying 'my kid can do that and yours cannot' sort of thing. I explain (to the children) that you've entered a zone where nothing is wrong...there are no good ideas or bad ideas...they are just ideas...you are not marked on it...I don't think they can actually grasp what it means to hear this dude sitting there saying that nothing is wrong...they are like...'what-ever!, anyway, quick, I better get it right, I don't want to get it wrong'...so I'll do whatever you did and this person is going to do...whatever we both did and the whole class does exactly the same thing'...because they are petrified; coz they just want to be right and succeed and not get into trouble (T1).

My daughter feels like she can't do something unless she is taught how and she will always ask 'is this the right way'...'am I doing it right'...like with the activity that they were doing...she would have been checking constantly with the artist that was doing it with her...to make sure that she was doing it right...or looking at what other people are doing...she wouldn't like to think that wasn't doing it correctly...so she feels like she always has to check before she is confident (M4).

The findings also support other researchers (Schirmacher and Fox 2009) who suggest when environments override children's autonomy and creativity they become dependent on others for solutions and answers.

With limited provision to a variety of arts experience in the later primary school curriculum, the findings suggested that mothers thought it was necessary to seek alternatives such as extra-curricular arts programs. Interestingly, some parents who did involve their children in extracurricular programs also discovered that this might have created inadvertent pressure on their child:

I have a couple of children who only paint for their parents...umm...like they want to come, but they paint for their parents...and if they don't think that it will meet up to their parents standards when they arrive they'll throw it in the bin (T4).

Other researchers (Anderson et al. 2003), suggest that negative pressures can result in the child's enjoyment in the experience and therefore they are less likely to reap the associated benefits such as positive peer interaction and skills development.

To excite the children's imaginations and creativity, a primary strategy employed by the teachers was to allow for children's input into the development of the artwork. By encouraging the children to use metaphors and analogies in descriptions and making comparisons, the teachers encouraged the children to understand new principles, concepts and theories:

My take on imagination is that it's a response to certain conditions...if I keep throwing ideas at them then it's not fertile ground for them to develop imagination...I just keep asking questions once we've set a scene...as an example; we are at the beach...I ask 'who is there?'...from there I continue to draw on them to develop the story...at the start they

say... 'I don't know'...some of the teachers I work with want to tell them...I say 'Shhhh! Let them develop that first thread of the idea for themselves'...I believe the more we allow them to develop the ideas the more we can engage them in imagination development (T2).

Importantly, the teachers considered that increasing the children's reflective processes would motivate the development of thought relating to their everyday lives, which would make the new knowledge relevant. Teachers also reported that once the children confirmed that the environment was encouraging, fostering and supportive of free imaginative expression, the children 'let go' of their creative inhibition:

One little boy...he didn't want to do a brim to his hat... 'Oh! No'... he said... 'I've got another idea, because my brain will be popping out of there'...so what he did was like a fez hat with the top of the hat open so all his ideas and his brain could be popping out of his fez hat...and what's nice, is that all the other kids accept the idea...they respect everyone's differences (T4).

As a result, the children began to demonstrate divergent thinking, giving solutions and presenting new and varied ideas as they began to discuss and work on the development of the artwork:

I had a selection of materials to dress the warriors...very shiny material, very...

umm...tapestry type material, black and white and red material...I could see them thinking, 'Ok, warriors?!'...I'd shown them a picture and the warrior was in red...I purposely showed it because I wanted to see who would go for red...one person went for red...the rest picked the textures...they stood in front of the material table for ages...picking, choosing...taking a piece...go back put it on...'No!'...go back...put it on...'No!'...go back...and one little girl said 'I can't find the right material, but I've got this (holding the material), can I do something with it?'...she cut out long rectangles and painted black all around those and then she put it on the warrior...it looked good, really good (T4).

Children Growing Through the Experience of Creative Arts

Over the four-month period of the children completing the creative arts activities, the mothers and teachers perceived that the children had displayed the development of several attributes and characteristics which are identified as critical thinking endeavours within the SSCCTF (Ennis, 2010). It was perceived that the children spontaneously demonstrated the development of Interpersonal, Intrapersonal and Naturalistic intelligences. For example, one mother reported that her daughter had developed reflective practices to recognise the natural world around her by making a connection between the smell of some trees and a past family holiday, which Ennis would describe as a naturalistic intelligence.

Teachers noted that relationships developed and that the children showed an understanding towards one another and an appreciation of one another through the connection of the art activity:

Sometimes...in my group of difficult boys...we ask the group to nominate who you think should get the bonus point and the reason why...they look out for each other...they look for who needs the point, who was upset when they came in but who got it together...they use it as a chance to make sure that everyone is ok...they make sure that the point goes to the one that needs it the most (T2).

I think that they learnt about themselves...to realize that they are not the greatest or yes I am good at this...they gauged themselves against other people's ability...they learnt so much (M5).

These comments from the teacher and mother respectively demonstrated a level of critical thinking that is congruent with Ennis's (2010) SSCCTF 'correlative disposition of caring' (Ennis 1996, 173), where the children were learning to recognise each other's differing personalities, their strengths and weaknesses, their likes and dislikes and the worth and dignity of others (Ennis, 1991, 1996, 2001).

The video footage of the children performing the re-enactment of dancing couples at the Sontoy Ballroom, Mandurah during the 1950's, clearly demonstrated that the children had engaged with the era and had embraced the opportunity to share their newly learned knowledge of the past social history of their region. The children appeared to revel in wearing the glamorous costumes of the day and had worked hard at mastering the complex dance steps required of them to ballroom dance. This demonstrated a strong sense of awareness and connection to others and the environment around them. The mothers also recognised these features.

At the end of the dance performance all the kids went to the teachers to bring them up to join in the dancing...I loved that bit...how they wanted to bring them all in to take part...they were so proud of it...learning all those steps...they were quite difficult steps, they weren't easy...there were some difficult twirling bits...he practised the moves at home...with all of us, we swapped partners...'no not like that, like this'...he led the way, he was teaching us (M6).

About them going back in time...I found that my son did go back in time... he did think 'now what would they have worn, am I wearing the right thing?'...he said 'jeans aren't right, but they will do if they are black...'can I wear boots?'...he went and saw my parents...'now Nanna tell me what you would have worn, what would Pop have worn?'...that was off his own bat...he also wanted to know...'do you remember walking through the cow pats Nanna?'...'do you remember where it was Nanna?' (M8).

Children's self-evaluation was evident by the children recognising their emotions and expressing their own goals and achievements (Figures 1 and 2). These effects of the arts experience concur with early work on multiple intelligences (Gardner 1983), which suggests that different types of intelligence are related specifically to creative arts, resulting in critical and creative thinking.

Thank you for coming in and teaching us how to draw cartoon characters. I learnt that the easy way to draw cartoon characters is when you draw three parts to separate different parts of the body. My favourite thing was when we got to draw the cartoon characters.

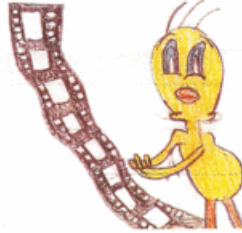


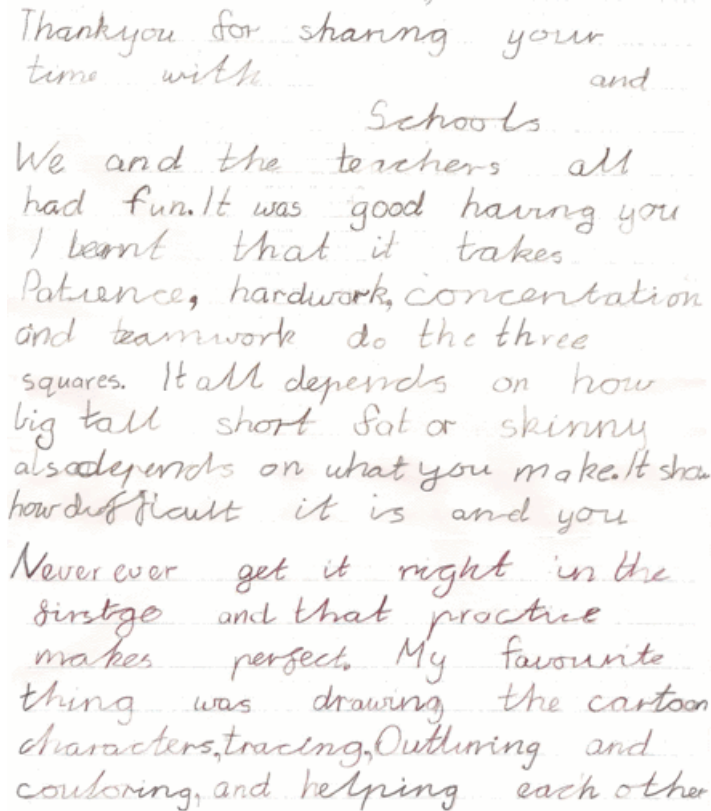
Figure 1: A Student Details the Process Required to Draw a Cartoon Character in Sections

Thank you for helping us to make cartoon characters and for teaching us how to do films. I learnt that when we draw our characters we have to take our time because if we don't take our time we won't get it right. My favourite thing was when I finished my character because it was my first time drawing a character and it looked good.

Figure 2: A Student Writes about a Deep Sense of Achievement in Completing the Art

In addition, Figure 3 illustrates a further example of the development of self-awareness through creative arts exposure, particularly the further transfer of awareness to others. The student reports having learnt 'patience, hard work, concentration and teamwork' and interestingly he/she discusses problem solving issues with comments relating to object shape and size. The transfer

of awareness to others is also highlighted with reference to enjoying 'helping each other'. The student also referred to perseverance suggesting that 'practice makes perfect'.



Thankyou for sharing your
time with _____ and _____
_____ Schools
We and the teachers all
had fun. It was good having you
I learnt that it takes
Patience, hardwork, concentration
and teamwork do the three
squares. It all depends on how
big tall short fat or skinny
also depends on what you make. It show
how difficult it is and you
Never ever get it right in the
first go and that practice
makes perfect. My favourite
thing was drawing the cartoon
characters, tracing, Outlining and
coloring, and helping each other

Figure 3: Student Writes on the Development of Individual and Social Capacity

Clearly, the interactions between the children and teachers, artists-in-residence and mother helpers assisted the move forward towards their potential. This supports Vygotsky's (1962) zone of proximal development theory whereby meaningful supportive collaboration with a teacher or capable adult, closes the gap between a child's actual development and his/her potential level for development.

Children Developing Confidence

The ability of children to learn from their creative art experiences and then apply that learning to other subject areas was highlighted in several of the children's artworks, illustrating the links between these and mathematics, science, history and written and spoken language. This type of integrated learning, which applies principles learnt in the art project to the other subject areas, was noted as the children followed problem-solving steps and monitored their own thinking, questioning and reasoning processes:

It can make them realize that they are learning stuff for a reason...ruling, estimating things, calculating...how many do we need...they can use what they've learnt...they were fascinated with the hot glue gun...it goes through and gets heated, makes a liquid... 'Oh! Yes!...we

learnt about solids and liquids'...you know it's scientific...they can use it in real life processes (M5).

We were following the history this year...we invited (name of museum curator)...he talked to them...gave them the background knowledge of what it was like...where they sat...what movie's they watched...what characters were involved...it was an historical thing as well...it went from the art, to us investigating the Mandurah history...so by the time they got to see their art work we had combined it with the era...now they will talk to me about what they have found out...how things have changed since then...we've had (curator) come back and they have written interview questions for him...it was great...they really linked to the history (T3).

Children's Creativity Contributing to Community Vibrancy

Importantly, the children displayed a sense of caring and pride in their contribution to the Festival and a belonging and connection to the community. In Figure 4 a student writes about the pleasure of seeing the artwork displayed at the Festival. Not only did the participating children benefit from viewing the Festival exhibits, but so did family and friends:

The children came away boosted...boosted in their self esteem...they were so proud... wanting to get their parents to come and see the banner...wanting to get their grandparents to see the banners...'nobody's going to believe that I did this'...'I'm going to tell mum that I painted this shirt on this person' (T5).

She just loved the sense of everybody doing this...you know... 'my class did this' and just running down that mall saying 'this is what we did'...she was also part of another art group and they'd done paper mache sculptures so she also had another piece down in the mall that she was really proud of (M7).

I was away...my husband took the kids...he didn't want to go...he doesn't go to art things...Well! he had a ball...with the children...they tried the graffiti...they saw all the exhibitions...he got roped into helping the clown do activities...how happy the family was when they came home...and bonded...having the experience with all the things that went on down there...amazing (M1).

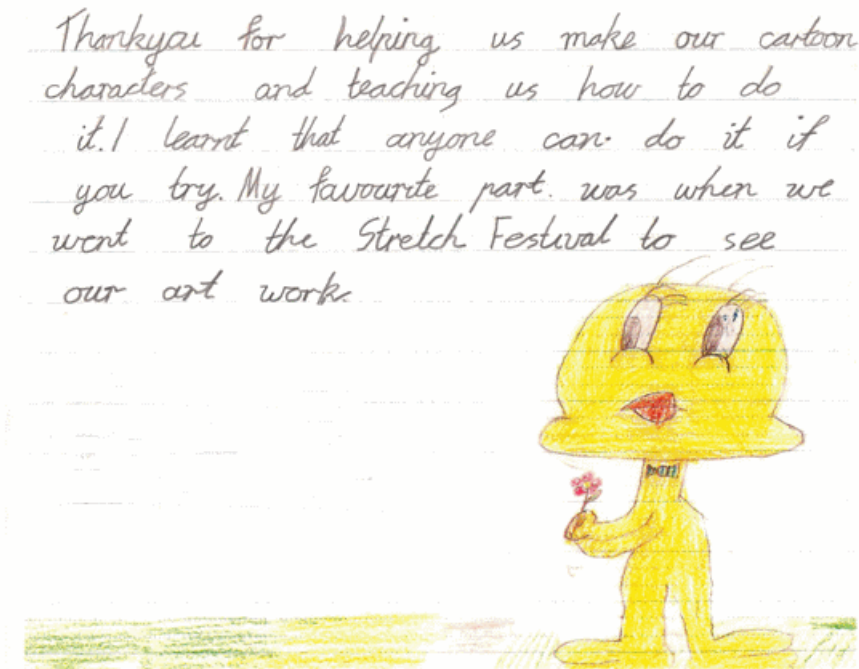


Figure 4: A Student Highlights the Pleasure of going to the Festival and being Able to see their Work Displayed

Conclusion and Recommendations

Critical thinking abilities are considered a vital competency to enable citizens to participate fully within a society and every child needs to have critical thinking dispositions and abilities to survive in today's rapidly changing world. This study has identified that creative arts is a powerful vehicle for critical thinking instruction in young children and subsequently highlights several areas that require consideration in relation to arts education policy and practice. One such consideration is the need for community engagement and input into the new directions of ACARA (2010). This includes greater dialogue between community arts organisations, teachers, schools and tertiary institutions. Re-visioning of arts pedagogy for the inclusion of arts projects and programs that include and incorporate the development of critical thinking in primary school children could translate into positive outcomes for all our children. In addition, policy makers, educators, researchers, institutions and creative organisations, should agree to bring parents and families into the dialogue regarding arts programs. Such collaboration has the potential to change children's behaviours, skills and outcomes. The findings also support the development of effective generalist teacher preparation courses, to ensure teachers are equipped with better skills to deliver arts programs effectively.

The limitations of the study include the self-selection of a volunteer sample of participants and the restrictions of researching a single setting, however by providing rich descriptions of the study and its participants, readers can determine the transferability of these findings to other settings. Further research to extend the findings of this study is recommended. A large-scale longitudinal study, which compares multiple institutions using a larger population cohort, would provide further insight on the impact of creative arts on the development of critical thinking dispositions. Tracking changes in children's critical thinking abilities over time would

provide further concrete evidence on the nature and processes of developing the requisite dispositions and abilities. An experimental study would also compare the impact of specific early childhood creative arts instruction with non-specific creative arts instruction, and the impact of varying types of environment cultures on critical thinking. A further recommendation is for research on cross-sector partnerships between schools and creative organisations to identify optimal models of collaboration in nurturing creativity and critical thinking simultaneously.

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