

Landscapes of Identity: Young children and the Visual Arts

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Abstract: This research investigated how early childhood teachers responded to young children’s cultural and ethnic diversity through the visual arts. The visual arts are a critical means through which children’s cultural ways of knowing can be communicated and made visible. This was a key discovery from a research project underpinned by the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki*, which cites cultural diversity as a central principle, and motivated by statistics in the 2013 New Zealand Census that showed a strong demographic contrast between the ethnicities of the youthful and adult populations. The research findings presented the teacher participants’ understandings of culture and ethnicity and their interpretation of the multi-faceted and complex ways children’s visual artwork expresses children’s cultural and ethnic identities. Fragments of the artworks were interwoven within a tapestry to visualise these complex and multi-faceted findings (Figure 1).

Keywords: Early Childhood Education; Visual Arts; Cultural and Ethnic Diversity



Figure 1. Tapestry. The image includes material from 14 early childhood centres digitally remixed by Veronica Garcia Lazo and a derivative work of Richard Laschon, 2016 © 123RF.com

“The traces that children leave us of their lives and thoughts cannot be enclosed in words alone but need something more: images, drawings, writings and above all narratives” (Spaggiari, 1997, p. 10).

This article draws upon research undertaken in Auckland, New Zealand during 2014-2015, which investigated how early childhood teachers are responding to young children's cultural and ethnic diversity through the visual arts. Three factors that motivated the research included: statistical information showing the widening disparity between the ethnicity of teachers and the children they teach (Ministry of Education, [MoE], 2014a, 2014b); the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki*, which cites cultural and ethnic diversity as a central principle (MoE, 1996); and a desire to investigate how teachers in the sector use visual arts experiences with young children to express their cultural and ethnic identities. Literature pertaining to early childhood visual arts education and the use of visual images as data in research (Leavy, 2009; McArdle, 2012; Pohio, 2013; Weber, 2008) further underpinned the project.

New Zealand's population is becoming increasingly diverse with more than 200 ethnic groups in residence (Statistics New Zealand [SNZ], 2014). This is particularly evident over the past two decades with Asian ethnic groups, for example, accounting for 6.6% of the population in 2001 nearly doubling in size to 11.8% in 2013. While New Zealand has always had diverse ethnic communities, the current landscape presents a very different view with the greater Auckland area (the largest city in New Zealand) the most ethnically diverse region. The population of Auckland reached 1.42 million, 39% of whom were born overseas. This makes Auckland one of the most diverse cities internationally, second only to Toronto (The Royal Society of New Zealand, 2014).

Cultural and ethnic diversity is especially evident in the younger population where nearly 50% of all children attending early childhood centres throughout New Zealand are of Māori (the indigenous people of New Zealand), Pasifika (people from the Pacific Islands), and Asian descent, as well as other ethnicities (SNZ, 2014). The remainder are of European descent. This statistic is in stark contrast to teachers in early childhood education, 71% of whom are of European origin (MoE, 2014b). In 2004, this figure was 76%, representing a small but significant 5% decrease. In contrast, teachers of Asian ethnicity had increased from 8% to 12% in 2014. Nonetheless, teachers who identify as European continue to make up nearly three-quarters of all early childhood teachers while children attending early childhood settings in New Zealand represent a considerably more diverse population. This trend is reflected internationally where teachers are predominantly European and female. The ethnic and cultural representation of children in early childhood and school settings is significantly more diverse (Feistritzer, 2011).

The early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 1996) is of critical significance to the research. Not only was it the first early childhood curriculum to be founded in New Zealand, but also the first bicultural (and bilingual) curriculum document both nationally and internationally. Designed for children from birth to school entry (typically five years of age), *Te Whāriki* cites cultural diversity as a central pedagogical principle, thus signalling expectations for teachers in the way it "affirms and celebrates cultural differences, and aims to help children gain a positive awareness of their own and other cultures" (MoE, 1996, p. 18).

The fact that the curriculum is bicultural reflects the continuing importance and value placed on diversity in early childhood education in New Zealand. As Lee, et al. (2013) comment, "*Te Whāriki* is an example of a cross-cultural curriculum designed with a vision of citizens who value democracy and empowerment, relationships, and a holistic view of children in a culturally aware, linguistic, family and community context" (p. 40).

Four principles (empowerment, holistic development, family and community, and relationships) and five strands (wellbeing, belonging, contribution, communication, and exploration), form the curriculum framework, which encourages a flexible and dynamic interpretation. This flexibility enables each early childhood setting to weave their own distinct

whāriki (woven mat). The *whāriki* or woven mat metaphor underpinning the curriculum (Figure 2), was deliberately selected by distinguished Māori educators Lady Tilly Te Koingo Reedy and Sir Tamati Reedy as a place “for all to stand on” (Te One, 2003, p. 33). The metaphor of the mat acknowledges the significance of flax weaving in traditional and contemporary Māori society, serving both utilitarian and ceremonial purposes, such as sleeping mats, food baskets and cloaks. Māori consider flax weaving to be an important living art form or taonga (something of value or treasure). The intricacies of the woven patterns symbolise past, present, and future. They contain the whakapapa (genealogies) and identity[ies] of both the weaver and the woven artefact. The metaphor of the mat also represents the different types of early childhood settings in New Zealand and embodies the diversity of children and families at the centres. This is reflective of and responsive to each unique learning and teaching community, echoing a key focus of the curriculum to “embrace a diverse range of early childhood services and cultural perspectives...” (May, 2002, p. 30).



Figure 2. The principles and strands of *Te Whāriki*

In a similar vein to *Te Whāriki*, the tapestry (Figure 1), interwoven with fragments collated from the children’s graphic research data, provides a visual landscape of their varied and diverse representations of themselves and their cultural milieu. The visual arts play a critical role for young children to signify their understandings of the world through their artworks (Pohio, 2013). Due to the holistic nature of *Te Whāriki*, which at the time of this research was the Ministry of Education 1996 edition, the visual arts are interwoven throughout the four principles and five strands of the curriculum, rather than as a specific essential learning area (or subject). While this curriculum is a non-prescriptive and holistic document, reference to the visual arts is evident in the communication strand (Goal 4). This goal states that “children experience an environment where they discover different ways to be creative and expressive” (MoE, 1996, p. 80). One of the learning outcomes specified to meet this goal describes how children need to be encouraged to develop “skills with

media that can be used for expressing a mood or a feeling or for representing information, such as crayons, pencils, paint ...” (MoE, 1996, p. 80). The visual arts provide ways for young children to be creative and is a language for them to express their understandings and perspectives about their experiences, as well as who they are. A key question posed for teachers in the communication strand, asks: “In what ways do the creative happenings in the early childhood centre reflect children’s cultural backgrounds?” (MoE, 1996, p. 80). The fifth strand of the curriculum, exploration, advocates for “children experience[ing] an environment where they develop working theories for making sense of the natural, social, physical, and material worlds” (p. 90). Through this strand, their spatial understandings can be expanded by creating work in a two-dimensional form, such as a sketch, photograph to a three-dimensional construction, or clay work.

There is less explicit reference to the visual arts in the other strands of the curriculum. The strand belonging, for instance, states that, “children and their families experience an environment where connecting links with the family and the wider world are affirmed and extended” (MoE, 1996, p. 56). This strand emphasises the importance of family and community and developing knowledge about places of significance, such as the local maunga (mountain) (Pohio, Sansom, & Liley, 2015). The visual arts provide an effective conduit for these connections to the local landscape to be acknowledged and fostered.

Literature review

An increasing body of literature about visual arts education for young children from New Zealand and further afield complements the curriculum. This literature recognises that visual arts experiences can create valuable opportunities for relationships to be enriched with families and the wider community, by drawing upon their cultural and ethnic identities (Ah Lam, 2013; McArdle, 2012; Pohio et al., 2015; Wrightson & Heta-Lensen, 2013). Similarly, Pohio (2006) argues that the socio-cultural approach to learning and teaching, encapsulated in *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 1996), aligns with contemporary perspectives on visual arts education. These perspectives recognise that learning is enhanced when the interconnecting worlds of children are acknowledged and cultivated, thereby contributing to the construction of positive social identities.

The literature also reveals that despite the holistic, interwoven position of the visual arts in the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, traditional visual arts activity-based programmes continue to exist (Probine, 2014). An activity-based approach potentially ignores the voices of children and can limit the opportunity for children to make their thinking visible because teacher-prescribed visual art experiences may constrain children’s creativity, leaving minimal opportunity to share their own ideas. McArdle (2012, p. 32) claims that unless teachers critically reflect upon why it is important to incorporate the visual arts, “visual art programmes could simply be a series of ad hoc ‘activities’, or the slavish following of a formula.” Boldt and McArdle (2013) propose that the visual arts can disrupt these discourses and “provide teachers with ways to challenge the assumptions of those diminished, standardized ways of seeing the world” through offering multiple avenues for children to engage in unique and creative ways to make meaning (p. 5).

The Reggio Emilia pedagogical project, which was established in Italy by founding forefather, Loris Malaguzzi, (Gandini, 2012) has been instrumental in challenging the role and identity of mainstream visual arts practices in early childhood education in New Zealand. In the Reggio Emilia approach, the visual arts are seen as a way for teachers to listen to children as they communicate, represent, and explore different aspects of their dynamic shifting identities (Vecchi, 2010). The visual arts can present deeper ways for young children to explore their ethnic and cultural identities and those of their peers (Pohio, 2009). Through their artwork, children can “learn

about themselves, and feel a sense of belonging” (McArdle, 2012, p. 39). Fore-fronting the visual arts beyond the novelty, window-dressing formula, e.g. for decorative purposes only, “can lead to important ways of exploring, knowing and expressing the world and one’s place in it” (Boldt & McArdle, 2013, p. 7). In addition, Beatson and Beatson (1994, p. 223) suggest that “... [visual] art is an agent of social cohesion. Its magnetism integrates isolated individuals into groups... [providing] essential building blocks for the construction of social identity”. Culturally relevant visual art experiences can promote understanding and empathy for other cultural ways of being (Feumana-Foa’i, Pohio, & Terreni, 2009).

The research design

Early childhood teachers from 160 early childhood centres in the Auckland region were identified from the Education Counts website (MoE, 2014a). They were selected on the basis of centre type (community, privately owned, care and education, kindergarten and Māori and Pasifika centres) and geographical location across Auckland. The first phase of the research comprised an anonymous online questionnaire to gather baseline data about the teachers (although not reported in this article, it informed phase two) and also to enable teachers to choose to be interviewed for the second phase of the research. The interviews were informed by the main research question: How are teachers of visual arts in the greater-Auckland region responding to the increasing ethnic and cultural diversity of children in early childhood settings?

Fourteen teacher participants engaged in individual interviews of 90-120 minutes to discuss their understandings about how they responded to children’s cultural and ethnic diversity through the visual art experiences presented in their centres. All the teacher participants who were interviewed were identified with pseudonyms. They were invited to bring samples of children’s artwork that they believed reflected their responsiveness to the ethnic and cultural diversity of the children they teach. No children were interviewed. In accordance with The University of Auckland’s ethics process, permission was sought from children and their parents or caregivers for the artwork to be brought to the interviews, photographed, and subsequently used in reporting the research (Figures 3-7). Each of the teacher participants opted to bring a range of children’s artwork from which fragments were interwoven within the tapestry (Figure 1). The tapestry became a collective visual representation of the data gathered from the early childhood centres and was collated to graphically represent the findings.

The research settings and participants

Early childhood education in New Zealand reflects a complex and diverse landscape, ranging from: kindergartens, care, and education settings; Pasifika early childhood centres (based on Pacific Islands languages); Te Kōhunga Reo (Māori medium centres) play centre and home-based care; and education settings. To add to this complexity, more than half of all centres are privately owned. To capture this diversity, settings were randomly selected on the basis of type and geographical spread across Auckland. The participating teachers interviewed reflected several of these diverse settings: four kindergartens, three community-based care and education settings, and seven privately owned care and education centres.

Prior to their interviews, the fourteen teacher participants provided data on their professional and academic qualifications and the early childhood centres’ ethnicity statistics and Philosophy Statement. This information provided a contextual framework for the interviews. All the participants were qualified female teachers, holding an early childhood teaching qualification. Of the fourteen teacher participants: five identified as European-New Zealand, two European-New

Zealand Māori, five identified as Asian, one as Samoan-Cook Islands and European-New Zealand, and one as European-New Zealand Dutch origin. Collectively, the children from all centres involved reflected the considerable diversity of the Auckland region, although each centre had its own unique ethnic and cultural make up.

Data collected through interviews and images

During the interviews, the teacher participants discussed the children's artwork they selected describing how they identified the artwork as being representative of the children's cultural and ethnic identity. In addition, the teacher participants talked about their own understandings of culture and identity, in addition to the ways they could provide culturally relevant provocations as stimuli for the children's artwork. The artwork was then photographically documented.

The emphasis on the visual artefact was prompted by arts-based research methods, which advocate for alternative ways of presenting findings by privileging images as a valid and powerful form of data (Lodge, 2009; Weber, 2008). There is an increasing body of literature on the theoretical grounding for using images in research (Leavy, 2009). This form of data collection is particularly pertinent in early childhood education to enable young children's voices to be heard more prominently, and as a way to "provoke action for social justice" (Weber, 2008, p. 47). Young children's voices often go unheard, although visual imagery and photography are becoming more evident in early childhood research (Probine, 2014). Images serve as a form of advocacy in the way that they can "evoke visceral and emotional responses in ways that are memorable, coupled with their capacity to help us empathise or see another's point of view..." (Weber, 2008, p. 47). The inclusion of images provides a further challenge to prevailing modes of academic discourse as well as "jar people into seeing something differently" (Leavy, 2009, p. 220). When children's artwork is used as research data the artwork can provoke other ways of seeing and understanding young children's thinking within the wider community.

The children's visual artwork, featured in this article provided a valuable data collection method alongside individual interviews with early childhood teachers. The visual artwork enabled the teacher participants to illustrate their responsiveness to the ethnic and cultural diversity of the children they teach, and offered a way for the children's voices to be made more visible.

One of the four principles in *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 1996, p. 42) focuses on the importance of relationships with family and community (whānau tangata), citing family and community as "an integral part of the early childhood curriculum." The five teacher participants who feature below offered differing perspectives on family and community, particular to their early childhood setting. The following scenarios highlight these differences through the teachers' voices and the children's artwork.

Laura: "Being good in their skin"

Laura, a teacher from a large inner-city care and education setting, is of Samoan, Cook Islands, and European descent. She works with children of diverse ethnicities-aged between birth to five years old. Laura described how in her centre, "the teachers make sure they create an environment for families where everyone has a sense of belonging, where they have a place, and embrace their culture, and identity and be good in their skin" (personal communication June 3, 2015). The philosophy of the centre indicates how the teachers acknowledge and enjoy the culture and diversity of people within their community. They seek to foster and nurture their own unique centres' culture through celebrations, rituals, and through telling stories. Laura said that in order

for her to genuinely understand the varying cultural and ethnic ways of being of the children and families, “I need to start really understanding my own culture and being good in my own skin” (personal communication, June 3, 2015).

Laura explained that the nearby Auckland War Memorial Museum provides a valuable provocation for both children and teachers to explore what it means to be a New Zealander, albeit filtered through their unique cultural experiences and understandings. Connections with Tikanga Māori (Māori cultural practices and protocols) are made through reading children’s picture books about Māori mythology, in particular Maui and his magic fishhook, who fished up the North Island (Gossage, 2005). The work of four year old Neve (Figure 3) illustrates the telling of her story through experiences with picture books, the visit to the museum and nature expeditions in the local domain. Neve interwove iconic koru (spiral) patterns in her drawing of the waka (canoe) that she observed during these different experiences. The koru is a prominent pattern drawn from native ferns and is incorporated in Māori carvings. Laura expressed her belief that Neve’s artwork illustrated her developing understanding of cultural symbols in New Zealand and how this understanding might connect to herself, as well as her own sense of place.



Figure 3. Neve, 4 years, European. A felt pen drawing of the waka at the Museum.

Celia: “Seeing themselves”

Celia, a teacher at a sessional kindergarten located in a predominantly European neighbourhood, noted how the communication strand in the curriculum acknowledges the notion of visual communication opportunities through children’s artwork. This enables children to tell their stories. Celia’s approach to teaching visual arts with children reflects the importance of “using cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant and effective for them” (Gay, 2013, p. 50). For example Celia provided mirrors and drawing materials for children to create images of themselves. Like Boldt and McArdle (2013), she is interested in developing children’s artistry through drawing upon the multiple cultures and identities they bring with them to the early childhood setting.

Self-portraiture was an intentional entry point for Celia to discuss with the children how they see themselves. Celia described how encouraging children to delve more deeply into their portraiture work opens up opportunities for them to recognise and discuss family traits in their

features. As Henry (Figure 4) undertook his self-portrait, he talked to Celia about his grandfather, describing similar family traits with the shape of his ears. Celia recounted that while Henry explored different paint combinations to depict his skin colour, his sense of empathy and understanding of other ways of being were heightened by examining a book about children living in other parts of the world and how their skin colours differed. She agreed with Ann Pelo's (2012) view that "the self-portrait is an intimate, bold declaration of identity" (p. 95). For Celia, the children's portraiture explorations created "opportunities for dialogue with families and for parents to see us seeing and knowing their child more deeply" (personal communication, May 8, 2015). This was particularly evident for the family of four year old Angel (Figure 4, right) who were delighted to see their daughter's portrait. Angel had limited English language and had recently started at the kindergarten. Through her artwork, she began to talk to Celia about her family, which created an opening for ongoing conversations with Angel and her family.



Figure 4. Self-portraiture (paint and pencil): Henry, European, 4 years; Angel, Chinese, 4 years

Dominique: “Learning through relationships”

Dominique, a European-Pakeha teacher, taught in a care and education centre in West Auckland with children from birth to five years who came from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Dominique spoke of how relationships are the cornerstone of learning and teaching in her environment. She said that the teachers see themselves as co-researchers with the children and listen acutely to the ideas the children bring to the learning environment. The teachers respond purposefully to the children's ideas by offering an array of carefully selected visual art resources to enable the children to artistically express their thinking. The centre philosophy draws upon the pedagogy of Reggio Emilia where the role of the teacher “is to be a competent listener to the visual language and to the children's individual and group strategies in order to support the children in a way that is in tune with their autonomous expression” (Reggio Children, 2005, p.15). Dominique explained how visual arts experiences at this centre mainly evolved from the children's lived experiences, not as set activities predetermined by the teachers. She recounted how “children express their understanding of the world through their artwork and when they are exposed to this they broaden their intellectual conversation and the provocation” (personal communication, June 16, 2015). Dominique spoke about Akira (Figure 5), a four year old boy of Māori heritage who had a strong interest in whaikaro (carving), and how he took this idea to his family and worked

with his father carving the family tiki. Akira subsequently became a mentor to other children at the centre, encouraging them to carve their patterns and designs on wood and supporting them with technical suggestions and guidance. This is an example of the way the visual arts can connect children with their own culture when teachers actively support this level of engagement. His family recognised Akira's passion for carving and purchased chisels so he could pursue this further. As an end of year gift, the children each received a set of chisels organised by the teachers at the centre to enable them to continue their carving designs.

Following their carving experiences, the Auckland War Memorial Museum provided further opportunities for the children to learn about *whare whaikaro* (traditional carved meeting houses). These carved houses were an integral part of daily life in Māori history and continue to exist as the focal point of *marae* (meeting place). Dominique described how “we learn through relationships, with the environment, with each other, with the materials we use, with our family background, with teachers ... it's all an exchange” (personal communication, June 16, 2015). Her teaching reflected the idea of the atelier (studio) posed by Gandini (2005, p. 7) as a place for “digging with one's own hands and one's mind , and for refining one's own eyes, through the practice of the visual arts.” Dominique believed that in her centre the visual arts play a critical role for children to research and refine their ideas in complex ways.



Figure 5. Drawings and carving: Akira, 4 years, Māori/European/Swedish/Japanese

Francesca: “Conveying identity”

Francesca, who identified as Māori and European, taught in an ethnically diverse sessional kindergarten with children aged between three and five years. Francesca and the teaching team decided to visit the Waitangi Treaty Grounds and Museum, where in 1840, Māori chiefs first signed The Treaty of Waitangi (Te Tiriti o Waitangi), New Zealand's founding document, as an accord with the British Crown about the governance and sovereignty of New Zealand. The teachers' aim was to explore their own identity in both a personal and professional way in order to understand more deeply the notion of identity from the perspective of young children. This experience enabled the teachers to connect or reconnect not only to their cultural identity but also to their families and the importance of understanding one's own cultural heritage. This type of understanding creates an opening for teachers to gain knowledge from parents about cultural identity so as to better support the children at the centre. Francesca recounted this experience:

It was hugely powerful for us as a teaching team going there, thinking about our identity and what it means to be a teacher and how we convey our identity and how our identity sits within us. As teachers I think we've really identified that the more knowledge that we can gain from parents about their cultural identity, their philosophy, their ideas around learning, a whole lot of things, the better that we can support children. (Personal communication, March 31, 2015)

Francesca described how the importance of the visual arts at her kindergarten aligns with the findings of a Ministry of Education Review (ERO, 2013), a reporting body that evaluates and reports on the education and care of children and young people in early childhood services, which states:

Visual arts have a high profile and are used effectively to reflect the cultural diversity of the kindergarten. Children choose from exciting, inviting and thoughtfully resourced areas that inspire child-initiated learning and support sustained play. Children are curious and confident, with a strong sense of belonging and enthusiasm for learning. (ERO, 2013)

She said that her centre is very well-resourced with a wide range of materials for children to explore, and child-initiated learning was paramount. Francesca spoke of how she and her colleagues drew upon their own visual art professional learning experiences, such as the experience described above, as well as other staff development workshops to carry out a visual arts project. To this end, large A1 canvases were created by the children (Figure 6). Each of these works reflected the ethnic and cultural identities of the children, families, and teachers at the centre. Francesca noted how the cherry blossom canvas emerged from the cherry tree growing at the kindergarten (Figure 6, far left). This resonated with families of Asian ethnicity, encapsulating experiences such as kite flying, which often feature in Chinese New Year celebrations. She shared her view that, "Art is a language that encompasses beliefs, values, ancestry and heritage" (personal communication, March 31, 2015).



Figure 6. 'Cherry Blossom', 'African Safari', 'Castles', 'Pacific Unity', by children from 3-5 years

Louise: "Creating a sense of belonging"

Louise, a teacher of Chinese ethnicity, was the only research participant with an arts design qualification and an early childhood teaching degree. She acknowledged that she sometimes focused on the technical aspects of children's art making and design, rather than on the ideas themselves. A particular focus of the large multicultural care and education centre that Louise

worked in with children from birth to five years, was celebrating different cultural festivals. Festivals include Diwali, Chinese New Year, Matariki-Māori New Year, etc. Louise described how the teachers at the centre, “strive to create a sense of belonging so children and families feel valued as who they are” (personal communication, May 6, 2015). Through different festival events children responded by delving into the narratives, artefacts, and experiences shared during these festivals. A traditional legend about Nian, the Chinese monster, which featured in the Chinese New Year celebrations, provoked Jessica, a four year old child of European-New Zealand and Māori ethnicity, to make two drawings from her impressions of this story (Figure 7 bottom left and right images). Her drawing of the whale surrounded by iconic koru (spiral) patterns (Figure 7, top left) depicts a traditional Māori legend about Maui. Jessica’s exploration of cultural stories through her visual arts is in line with the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, where it is promoted that “each early childhood education service should ensure that programmes and resources are sensitive and responsive to the different cultures and heritages among the families of the children attending the service” (MoE, 1996, p. 18). Louise considered that the visual arts provided a meaningful way for this to happen.

Louise also spoke of the notion of the environment as the third teacher. This aligns with the perspectives of Loris Malaguzzi. He described the environment as a space that speaks and that “the space [environment] has to be a sort of aquarium that mirrors the ideas, values, attitudes, and cultures of the people who live within it” (Gandini, 1998, p. 177). Louise believed that the environment at the centre plays an important role in provoking and inspiring the children’s ideas, in addition to thinking through the various resources and materials available. Here the teachers deliberately choose artefacts that reflect the different cultural and ethnic backgrounds of the children to create a sense of belonging.



Figure 7. Felt-pen drawings: Jessica, 4 years, Māori-European

Discussion

The three main findings from the research draw from data collected through the voices of these five early childhood teacher participants and the artwork of the children in their early childhood settings. The first finding, albeit enacted in varying degrees, was an awareness of the

imperative for teachers to embrace their diverse ethnic and cultural communities as outlined in *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 1996). Francesca and other teachers at her centre thought it was vital to engage personally with understanding their own cultural heritage before they embarked on the large canvas project with children (Figure 6). Celia and Dominique discussed how listening acutely to the different ways children express themselves through meaningful learning and teaching opportunities enabled young children to explore their cultural and ethnic identity (Figures 4 and 5).

The second finding was a commitment by the teachers in the research to provide visual arts experiences that were responsive to children's cultural and ethnic identities. However, the degree of provision varied considerably in the way they were implemented. The teacher participants' understandings reflected the way they presented visual art experiences to the children. This ranged from a position of cultural knowledge, evident in Laura's and Francesca's teaching (Figures 3 and 6) to a focus predominantly on cultural festivals, such as Louise's (Figure 7). The notion of 'culture' is often interpreted as representing the most visible and recognisable signs pertaining to a particular group, but the less overt aspects such as values, beliefs, and styles of communication play an equal, if not more influential role (Bishop, 2011). This less visible component of culture is sometimes overlooked, with understandings reflected in a predictable way. In other words teachers need to look more deeply at what constitutes culture and apply this depth of knowledge in their teaching of the visual arts.

The third finding showed that the teacher participants' own ethnic and cultural identity did not deter them from providing environments that facilitated opportunities for young children to "be good in their own skin," as one of the teacher participant's remarked. This perspective, along with "seeing themselves," "learning through relationships," "conveying identity," and "creating a sense of belonging," were evident through the teachers' approaches to the provision of children's visual arts experiences. There were variations, however, in how the teachers were able to recognise the significance of children's artwork as cultural and identity markers, and the extent to which responses were made. Offering experiences beyond the early childhood setting, such as visiting the museum and the local bush, and the extensive provision of resources, were some indicators of the teacher participants' recognition of the importance of providing children with a broader range of stimuli or avenues for exploration of identity.

An unforeseen outcome was how their involvement in the research prompted two of the five teacher participants to critique the purpose behind the visual art experiences they offered to young children. Two teacher participants acknowledged that participation in the research had caused them to reassess their pedagogical approach and seek everyday experiences as a catalyst for children's art making as opposed to more teacher-directed art activities. Another three teacher participants found that the research served as an affirmation of the extensive work they undertake to ensure that the cultural and ethnic identities of young children are deeply embedded within the learning and teaching environment through well-considered intentional visual arts teaching.

Limitations of the research

The shape and form of the research highlighted potential limitations. First, the early childhood teachers who volunteered to participate were likely to have had a vested interest in this research topic, and perhaps considered that they held some level of proficiency in their responsiveness through the visual arts to the unique identity(ies) of young children. Moreover, most of the fourteen teacher participants who agreed to be interviewed, including the five who feature in this article, taught in settings with ethnically diverse children. Although beyond the

scope of this small-scale research, a third limitation is that the voices of children were not sought. While the children's artwork was an integral part of the data collection it was the teachers who spoke about them on their behalf. The perspectives of children talking about their own artwork could have provided an extra dimension and enriched the data significantly. Several teacher participants did present supplementary documentation in the form of children's narratives about the artwork, which deepened understandings of some of the images. The foremost limitation could be perceived as the issue of validity because the findings are not generalizable in the traditional sense. Leavy (2009, p. 57), however, purports they have legitimacy through "the creation of a realistic, authentic, life-like portrayal" in the unique and diverse artworks created by the children.

Conclusion

This small-scale research project sought the perspectives of fourteen early childhood teachers about how they were responding to the increasing diversity of young children attending their early childhood centres through the visual arts. The findings show that the visual art experiences they offered enabled the children to express their cultural and ethnic identities. It was also clear from the findings that early childhood teachers were aware of the imperative to embrace their diverse communities and were reflective in their practices. It became evident that the visual arts were a powerful means for celebrating diversity in these early childhood settings. This viewpoint aligns with Gay's (2013) research about culturally responsive pedagogy that highlights how "...teachers, whatever else they teach, teach themselves" (p. 53).

The findings from the research have the potential to influence policy and enhance interactions with professional bodies and the Ministry of Education about a field that is becoming increasingly marginalised, particularly in the compulsory education context (Laird, 2012). While the early childhood sector is underpinned by *Te Whāriki*, a holistic curriculum, the place of the visual arts can still be vulnerable because, as previously highlighted, visual art experiences could become "a series of ad hoc 'activities'" (McArdle, 2012, p. 32). These findings may provoke early childhood teachers to be more critically aware of the visual art experiences they offer young children in early childhood settings. As Gay (2013, p. 49) argues, culturally responsive teaching requires teachers to "connect in-school [early childhood] learning to out-of-school [early childhood] living". The stories told through the voices of the teachers and presented through the children's art works capture and highlight the importance of building relationships. Engaging with community is a key feature of *Te Whāriki* and is recognised as a fundamental principle of early childhood education in New Zealand. This research has shown that the arts can offer a means of building relationships and connections between the teachers, the children, families and community (Boldt & McArdle, 2013). Although small in scale, this research has the potential to make a valuable contribution to the field of visual arts education in early childhood in New Zealand and internationally.

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