

Chapter 5

The Heart of Innovation: Arts Education in the Middle Years

Dr Danielle Twigg

The middle years of schooling are considered critical to the development of adolescents. ‘Tweens and young teens face many challenges during these years between childhood and adulthood. Adolescent brain development, online safety, dealing with bullying and peer pressure, and body image are only a few areas of concern for teachers and parents of middle years students. Schools have a responsibility to not only provide students with the opportunity to develop skills which will help them to make informed decisions, but also to provide a safe and supportive environments that enable students to develop the skills of resilience. Arts education in the middle years offers an opportunity to move beyond the challenges of adolescence, and into a place where solving problems through creative thinking and innovative design is celebrated. This chapter begins by exploring the relationship between arts education and the adolescent experience. The two vignettes included in this chapter offer practical ideas for middle years teachers. The first vignette demonstrates how to prepare the learning environment to enhance creativity and innovation for middle years students. The second vignette provides information on suggested art education activities which are specifically designed to support the social and emotional wellbeing of adolescents. The chapter concludes with reflections from the author on the future of arts education in Australian schools.

Introduction

When the words ‘art’ and ‘school’ are mentioned in the same sentence, many people envisage a busy classroom filled with young children making colourful, craft creations.

Allow yourself to visualize this classroom fully and take a moment to reflect on the following questions:

- What do you see?
- What do you hear?

- How do you feel as a teacher in this setting?
- What does this image tell you about ‘art’ and ‘school’?
- Do you recall your own art experiences at school as a student? If so, what do you remember?
- How did those experiences (positive or negative) affect you now as an adult?
- How have these values (and experiences) shaped your teaching practices?

Now, take a moment to visualize a typical middle years classroom. Consider the following questions:

- What do you see?
- What do you hear?
- How do you feel as a teacher in this setting?
- What does art education ‘look like’ in the middle years? Is it the same or different? Why?
- What art experiences (positive or negative) do the students in this classroom bring to this setting?
- Is the learning environment conducive to creativity? Why or why not?

Romantic notions of children’s visual artwork abound, however research (Boone, 2008) indicates that young children’s art experiences have the potential to impact views on themselves and their interactions with others. This chapter examines how art education in upper primary and lower secondary settings has the potential to benefit the social and emotional wellbeing of students. Drawing upon scholarly literature, the beginning of the chapter explores art education theory and its relevance to contemporary teaching practices in the middle years. Two (2) vignettes are then presented which (i) offer practical suggestions to middle years teachers in preparing the classroom as a learning environment for creativity, and (ii) provide suggestions for art-based activities which are designed to enhance social and emotional wellbeing amongst middle years students. The chapter concludes with the author’s professional reflections on the impact current practices may have on the future of arts education in Australian middle years classrooms.

From the Beginning: Art Education Practices and the Developing Child

To gain a better understanding of the relationship between art education practices and the middle years schooling experience for students, it is valuable to consider the scholarly literature on art education. Art education practices in schools vary widely, however the major approaches to teaching art in Western nations can be broadly categorized as: **progressive, discipline-based** and **contemporary** (Efland, 1990). Let's look briefly at each of these three approaches.

Developmental theory, which dominated the field of early childhood education and continues to dominate certain contemporary educational settings, is the foundation of the **progressive approach** (Feldman, 1995). Historically, progressive approaches to art education encouraged students to have freedom of choice within a structured setting (Soucy et al., 1990). The progressive approach to art education links artistic expression with children's natural development (Feldman, 1995) and has been defined by Lowenfeld & Brittain (1970) as a 'laissez-faire' focus in which natural ability unfolds over time. These theories continue to influence art education heavily in schools today (Speck, 1989).

Art education moved from a child-centred to a subject-centred focus, with the development of **discipline-based art education** (DBAE) by well-known American art educator Elliot Eisner (Efland, 1990). As a result, instead of teaching art as a form of creative self-expression as in the past, art educators promoted the idea of art as a discipline (Efland, 1990). Eisner (1988) argued that art creation itself is a non-verbal language which is equally significant as verbal language to the development of a child. In comparing the progressive approach with discipline-based art education, Jeffers (1990) notes that the role of the teacher is minimal in either approach. In progressivism, the teacher does not intervene at all in the child's artwork, while in DBAE, the teacher manages the prescribed curriculum, with little interaction with the student's artwork. Some aspects of DBAE,

such as integration as arts into the curriculum, can be seen in classrooms today.

Contemporary approaches evolved from a desire to incorporate concepts such as multiculturalism, feminism and popular culture into art education (Efland, 1990). As a result, DBAE eventually gave way to CBAE (community-based art education) for young children (Efland, 1990). The new CBAE curriculum linked art to human and cultural experience (Congdon, Bolin, & Blandy, 2001). Examples of contemporary approaches include school-wide art projects (Hinde, 1999), community-based art (Aprill, 2003), and the artist-in-residence model (Grant, 2003) to name a few. Contemporary approaches to art education are quite commonly used as a vehicle to build partnerships between schools and the community today.

As mentioned previously, art has been recognised for its contribution to the developing child (Bresler, 1992). Early exposure to art is critically important, and if left unnurtured, may be difficult to recover (Eisner, 1988) once children mature into adolescents. In addition, research has shown that a sensory-rich environment is foundational for creating conceptual understanding (Wright, 1991; Cox, 2005) and that individuals construct knowledge on the basis of their experience (Vygotsky, 1978; Twigg & Garvis, 2010). Therefore, it may be argued that arts education in the middle years has the potential to enhance resilience and improve academic achievement among adolescent students. The following two vignettes provide a foundation for integrating arts practices into middle years schooling environments in order to support the development of social and emotional competency.

Vignette 1: Designing an effective learning environment for art education

Creating an engaging, motivating and intellectually stimulating learning environment is essential to teaching in the middle years. Regardless of the school timetable, individual teachers have the opportunity to support social and emotional wellbeing through art

*education on a daily basis. Each teacher's vision of an effective learning and teaching environment is underpinned by the teaching strategies used in the classroom. For example, one teacher may use a more traditional style of teaching while another teacher within the same school supports negotiated learning. As a result of the fundamental approaches to teaching, each teacher's classroom will undoubtedly reflect these views. However, it is important for each teacher to ask themselves, "**What is the classroom environment communicating to student learners?**"*

*Some of the considerations which need to be made when designing a learning environment which supports art education include **time, space, learning goals, equipment and materials, and groupings**. Let's now look closer at how decisions about each of these key considerations have implications for designing an effective learning environment for middle years art education.*

Time

When designing an arts-focused learning environment, issues of time must be considered, such as:

- *How much time do the students spend in the classroom?*
- *How are transitions between classrooms managed to support independent work? Are students allowed to return to the classroom at a designated time during the day/week to complete unfinished work?*
- *Can the timing of activities be negotiated and cater for student's deep involvement in learning?*

It must also be noted that whole school timetables may have implications for classroom learning environments.

Space

Not every classroom is the same size or shape. The physical space and resources contained within a classroom need to be considered when designing a learning environment which supports art education, through:

- *Encouraging movement and interaction (deep involvement in learning)*
- *Promoting independence and self-direction*
- *Encouraging use of specific skills, such as action research*
- *Large vs small spaces, quiet vs busy spaces and flexible vs structured spaces for different activities*
- *Stimulating curiosity through problem solving*

These considerations ultimately lead to relationship building and enhanced negotiation skills through the thoughtful use of classroom space.

Learning Goals

External curriculum and assessment demands are ever-present in schools. All too often teachers focus on these demands at the expense of teaching students study skills, time management and problem solving techniques. An arts-focused learning environment will provide adolescent learners with many options for developing thinking processes and skills. Some considerations for enhancing the classroom environment in relation to learning goals include:

- *Developing positive learning dispositions*
- *Allowing for degrees of involvement in learning activities (i.e., long term, short term)*
- *Tapping into student interests as well as real-life experience*

Focused and open-ended experiences in a learning environment that supports art education will support student's ability to cope with the pressures of assessment.

Equipment and Materials

Depending on the subjects being taught in a particular classroom, equipment and materials may vary widely. For example, a computer lab or laboratory will have different equipment and materials than a standard classroom which teaches literacy and numeracy subjects. Some considerations for equipment and materials include:

- *Aesthetic appeal*
- *Availability of equipment and materials (i.e., freely available, sign-out)*
- *Equity of access and participation*
- *Position and location of equipment and materials, based on frequency of use*
- *Health and safety considerations*

It is important to acknowledge that specialised classrooms, as those previously mentioned, may prove challenging to teachers who are working towards designing an effective learning environment which supports art education. However, alternative solutions may be sought through indoor/outdoor spaces or exchanges with other classrooms.

Groupings

The way in which teachers determine how to group students must be considered when trying to design an effective art education learning environment. The relationships between students in group situations can enrich the social and emotional wellbeing of all students if managed correctly. When grouping students, it is important to consider the range of abilities and ratio between students and teachers. Here are a few ideas:

- *Ensure that grouping encourages social interaction and cooperation*
- *Acknowledge and demonstrate respect for diverse learning styles*
- *Promote independence as well as cooperative learning*
- *Use a variety of grouping techniques to ensure all students have experiences as leaders and group members over time*

By providing opportunities for students to work with each of their classmates on different learning activities, they will practice and develop many important skills including project management, problem solving and peer negotiation.

Reflections on Vignette 1: Designing an effective learning environment for art education

*Thinking back to my own experience as a classroom teacher in a fine arts school, I recall the difference the learning environment made to my students. In my years as an early childhood teacher, I worked fastidiously to prepare the classroom for my students who, in many cases, were coming to my classroom without prior 'school' experience. Here are a few examples of how I used **time, space, learning goals, equipment and materials**, and **groupings** to develop an art-focused learning environment for my students.*

Time

One of the first tasks to complete before the beginning of the new school year was to determine the timetable for my classroom. Based on the whole school timetable, I was able to determine how to plan for my students to ensure there was time to allow for deep involvement in learning activities.

Space

In my classroom setting, I worked to ensure that there were spaces for whole group instruction, small group work, and quiet spaces for individual activities. My students enjoyed having a saltwater fish tank and reading loft, both of which added to the aesthetic appeal of the classroom and stimulated discussion.

Learning Goals

Teachable moments provided many opportunities for students to link their existing prior knowledge to work on action research projects. For example, one day a butterfly flew into the classroom. As a group, we discussed what we knew about butterflies which sparked interest from the students about the life cycle of butterflies, types of butterflies and where butterflies live in the world. I used each of these areas of interest to develop an inquiry-based unit of study which focused on living creatures in our environment and aligned with the curriculum objectives and assessment for this year level.

Equipment and Materials

Arranging the equipment and materials in my classroom according to frequency of use was very helpful for students. Some materials which were only used occasionally were available on a rotational

basis or upon request. For instance, when my students were creating a sculpture of a skyscraper, they requested that the foam pieces used for a project completed earlier in the year to be available for making windows on their new creation.

Groupings

Students in my class were grouped in various ways for different learning situations. Small groups were designed to include students with a range of abilities and interests to help develop new and enhance existing relationships. Students were also given free choice time in which they were allowed to make decisions about the learning activities they wanted to engage in with their peers.

I hope that this reflection on Vignette 1 has provided readers with some new ideas for designing an effective learning environment which supports art education in the middle years of schooling.

Vignette 2: Arts-based activities for building social and emotional competency

Adolescence is a significant period of transition both physically and mentally for young people. During this time, children's bodies and minds are changing rapidly as they move from childhood to adulthood. This period of maturation involves many milestones as teenagers are deemed 'ready' for certain social and cultural experiences, including driving motor vehicles, consuming alcohol and having intimate relationships. These 'growing up' experiences of middle school students are often accompanied by an increasing burden on school personnel to take responsibility for these actions. Whenever there is public interest and media attention in a particular issue, there is often a suggestion that it be addressed in schools. It is worth remembering, however, that these are extremely complex issues. While schools provide a unique opportunity to support the social and emotional competency of adolescents, the core business of schools is maximising student achievement of learning outcomes.

On the other hand, there is a significant body of research that suggests the enhancement of a child's health overall status improves their education achievements (World Health Organisation, 2006). Therefore, schools have a responsibility to provide students with opportunities to develop essential knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to enable them to make informed decisions about their health behaviours (Australian Health Promoting Schools Association, 2001). The following art education activities are designed to enhance social and emotional wellbeing amongst middle years students:

Song/Poem/Dance of the Day

Encourage students to share a favourite song, poem or dance each day in class. For this activity, you will need a large space for all students to gather comfortably. You may also need a music system and a board for instructions/information. There are many ways you can organise this activity. Here are some suggestions:

- 1. Draw a student name each day. Ask the student to prepare something to share the next day in class.*
- 2. Have a group of students work together to plan the daily song/poem/dance for each day of the week.*
- 3. Bring in a selection of songs/poems/dances or take the students to the library for research and to collect resources.*

This simple 5-10 minute activity works well to begin or end the day, or even can be used as a 'brain break' after a long period of concentration. Students will enjoy this opportunity to educate others about their favourite music, poetry or dance moves in a safe and supportive environment.

Warm Fuzzies

Have a discussion with your students about how it feels when people are emotionally moved by an act of goodwill or kindness. In a large group seated on the floor in a circle, ask for volunteers to share stories about their experiences of helping others and/or being helped. Remind listeners to look at the speaker and listen with care. Explain to the students that you are going to start a 'warm fuzzy; letter writing campaign to recognise the work of each student in

contributing to the classroom. For this activity, you will need A3 envelopes for each student (you may also wish to include assistant teachers and yourself in the count!), colouring tools and craft items for decoration. You will also need to follow these instructions:

- 1. Give each student an A3 envelope. Ask the students to write their name on it and decorate it on one side.*
- 2. Hang each envelope in an easily accessible location (i.e., front of student desks, lockers).*
- 3. Instruct students to write simple, kind-hearted messages for individual students and place them (secretly) into the appropriate envelope. Use messengers for extra secretive delivery!*
- 4. At the end of the week after everyone has received a few messages, open the envelopes and share in the fun! (NOTE: Check to make sure each student has roughly the same number of messages + 1 from you!)*

Setup a location for extra paper and decorating supplies in the classroom for students. It is recommended that you use 'warm fuzzies' over a week or two only to avoid complacency and keep the goodwill fresh. Suggested variations for this activity include creating mobiles or sculptures of the 'warm fuzzy' messages. This activity also works well with staff/colleagues for purposes of team-building. An all-around fun and memorable activity!

Media Monsters

This activity gives middle years students an opportunity to share their views of the world from behind the guise of a monster.

Introduce the concept of 'media monsters' to your students - the little creatures who live in the desks and chairs of the school dreaming up creative stories to share. For this activity, students can work in groups to write feature articles, blogs, e-zines, television shows, or radio broadcasts as if they were Media Monsters. The only rules for this activity are that the stories need to be creative, based on actual events and no internet research is allowed. You will need all of the media resources available for student usage. Equipment may include digital cameras, audio recorders, computers, paper, art supplies, and microphones. Instructions are as follows:

1. *Each group will determine its mode of delivery (i.e., television show, e-zine, etc) and topic.*
2. *Provide an overview of the story to the Monster Press Editor for review. (You can take on this role. Also, you can have the students submit their story in a special box for the Editor).*
3. *Receive feedback on the story from the Monster Press Editor.*
4. *Each group will present its story at the Annual Monster Mash event.*

Students will enjoy this opportunity to tell the stories of the unspoken Media Monsters. It is important to ensure that all stories are light-hearted and do not contain any defamatory commentary towards classmates or other members of the school community. Any concerns are best handled with individual students in a sensitive and tactful manner as they come up rather than as a whole group. Overall, this activity gives students a chance to use their imagination and experiment with storytelling in a comfortable setting. You may even decide to invite an audience to Annual Monster Mash event for extra fun!

Reflections on Vignette 2: Arts-based activities for building social and emotional competency

The activities suggested in Vignette 2 are only a few ideas for middle years teachers. Any activity that involves problem solving and innovation conducted in collaborative groups can contribute to increased social and emotional competency amongst students. Student-centred activities, such as paired sharing and role playing, allow students to take on new perspectives and share information with peers. More formalized inquiry-based activities afford students the opportunity to develop conflict resolution skills and debate relevant topics. These suggestions can be linked quite easily to art education through special projects and discipline-based art education practices.

Adolescence is a difficult period for many students and the simple act of adding some fun to learning can do wonders for confidence level. I hope that readers will try one or two of the suggested activities from

Vignette 2 in their own teaching environment, and that these experiences will contribute to a growing repertoire of arts-based activities in middle school classrooms throughout Australia and around the world.

Conclusion

This chapter began with a brief overview of historical approaches to art education. Next, two vignettes were provided with a focus on (i) designing an effective learning environment for art education; and (ii) art activities which support the development of social and emotional wellbeing among middle school students. The chapter now concludes with a reflection by the author on Australian art education in the middle years.

In my experience of teaching in middle school settings, I have learned that students respond best to teachers with whom they have a connection. The question becomes: “How do I connect with my students?” In many cases, it can be as simple as sharing some basic information about yourself personally, such as about your pet or hobbies. Students who are more reserved or are less interested in you personally may develop a connection through active learning or changes to the learning environment as discussed earlier in this chapter. Quite often the connections we make with our students are unbeknownst to us – good, bad or otherwise. I often reflect on teachers I had along the way and the comments and experiences which shaped my views, both positively and negatively, on education and life. Rarely have I had the opportunity to reconnect with those teachers, and thank those who influenced my life path in a positive manner.

My hope is that art education will find a comfortable space in every middle years classroom in Australia and beyond. The ‘teachable moments’ and memories of schooling experiences often come as a result of spontaneity, collaboration and thoughtful approaches to innovation. Whether you are a beginning teacher or an experienced teacher, it is important to respond to the specific needs of the students in your classroom and find creative ways to reach out to them. It is not easy to be ‘in the middle’ all the time. Make a connection. Create

a challenge. Get down to the heart of the matter. Be well. Act smart. Live, laugh and learn through art.

References

- Aprill, A. (2003). Finding the thread of an interrupted conversation: The arts, education, and community. *Community Arts Network Reading Room*, 3.
- Australia Health Promoting Schools Association (2001) National framework for health promoting schools (2000-2003). National Health Promoting Schools Initiative, Australia Health Promoting Schools Association.
- Boone (Twigg), D.J. (2008). From the refrigerator door to the art gallery floor: Young children's experiences with the display of their own visual artwork. Doctoral Thesis, Queensland University of Technology, Faculty of Education, Kelvin Grove, Qld (Australia).
- Bresler, L. (1992). Visual arts in primary grades: A portrait and analysis. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 7, 397-414.
- Congdon, K. G., Bolin, P. E., & Blandy, D. (2001). *Histories of community-based art education*. Reston, VA: National Art Education Association.
- Cox, S. (2005). Intention and meaning in young children's drawings. *International Journal of Art and Design Education*, 24(2), 115-125.
- Efland, A. D. (1990). *A history of art education: Intellectual and social currents in teaching the visual arts*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Eisner, E. W. (1988). *The role of discipline-based art education in America's schools*. Los Angeles: Getty Center for Education in the Arts.
- Feldman, E. B. (1995). *The artist: A social history* (2nd ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Grant, D. (2003). Back to school: Artist-in-residence programs. *American Artist*, 67(734), 14.

- Groundwater-Smith, S., Ewing, R., & Le Cornu, R.,(2003). *Teaching challenges and dilemmas*. Southbank , VIC: Nelson Australia Pty Ltd.
- Hinde, J. (3 July 1999). Curriculum turns into an art form. *The Australian*, p. 1, from <http://global.factiva.com>
- Jeffers, C. (1990). Child-centred and discipline-based art education: Metaphors and meanings (abridged). *Art Education*, 43(2), 16-22.
- Lowenfeld, V., & Brittain, W. L. (1970). *Creative and mental growth* (5th ed.). New York: Macmillan (NY); Collier-Macmillan.
- Soucy, D., Stankiewicz, M. A., & National Art Education Association (USA). (1990). *Framing the past: Essays on art education*. Reston, VA: National Art Education Association.
- Speck, C. (1989). A depth art curriculum for the primary school. *Australian Art Education*, 13(3), 6-18.
- Twigg, D. & Garvis, S. (2010). Exploring Art in Early Childhood Education. *International Journal of the Arts in Society*, 5(2), Champaign, IL: Common Ground Publishing.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- World Health Organisation (2006). Creating an environment for emotional and social well-being. Geneva, Switzerland: Author.
- Wright, S. (1991). *The arts in early childhood*. Brookvale, NSW: Prentice Hall.