

Our Creative Journey: The Starry Night Project

Jody Vaughan

jodyvaughan@gmail.com

Abstract: The researcher's overall goal was to cultivate in young children an appreciation for their artistic creativity. The researcher started by asking the questions "How can teachers foster young children's artistic creativity?" and "How do teachers' views impact on children's creativity?" The setting for the research was a day-care centre in a high socio-economic area, and involved the observation of children aged four to five years. Five full-time staff were chosen to participate, mainly because of their fondness for artistic creativity. An action research methodology was chosen because the researcher wanted to reflect on current practice with the aim of bringing about change in how art is implemented with the children. A questionnaire was used for collecting data.

The research findings indicated that there was a need to more closely align the curriculum, the environment, and teachers' views and perceptions, and after discussions with the team, a new arts-based curriculum was introduced. This more open curriculum provided opportunities for children and staff to focus more strongly on processes and to explore new techniques. Children were given more time for developing the creative processes and also time to revisit their artwork. There was a move towards a balance of child-centred and adult-initiated experiences, and a designated space was made available to the children, away from the flow of traffic. The project was called the "Our Creative Journey: The Starry Night Project", the title being based on the original focus of the children's work. The outcomes of the Starry Night Project were profound, with children demonstrating a more positive self-concept and view of themselves as artists.

Key Words: young children, creativity, teachers, early childhood education curriculum, teachers' views/perceptions

Introduction

There has been a division since early last century on how children's art is perceived, with some believing that children's art is wonderful and should be celebrated, while others view it as "primitive" (Wright, 2003, p. 25).

If there is such division amongst adults' views on children's art, then how can we expect children to have a positive view of themselves as artists, especially if they receive the thought or idea from adults that their art is primitive? (Wright, 2003, p. 25). In the 1900s, there was a shift in how educators viewed children's art, and there was more emphasis put on freedom and exploration rather than template art (Wright, 2003). Despite this, we still see a lot of template art happening in centres, and we as teachers should question how this fosters or even develops young children's artistic creativity.

The purpose of the research project was to cultivate in young children an appreciation for their artistic ability because research suggests that artistic creativity can often diminish throughout one's life if it is not fostered continuously (Sharp, 2004). To help achieve this goal, the researcher asked two questions: "How can teachers foster young children's artistic creativity?" and "How do teachers' views impact on children's creativity?" These questions were asked as the researcher believed that teachers play a role in fostering children's development, especially in a full-day-care setting, and gaining a better understanding of the

teachers' views and opinions on the subject would later help the collaboration needed for creating change. These questions also had some practical importance as the centre chosen for the research already did a lot of creative and artistic work with its children.

There are countless examples in the literature that discuss the importance of implementing the arts and creativity, and how this benefits not only young children's creativity but also their holistic development. For example, Sharp (2004) stated, "... research suggests that children's artistic creativity can be enhanced through specific teaching programmes, including art-based ones" (p. 8); these points are discussed in depth later in the report.

While the centre was already implementing art experiences for the children, there was no actual arts-based curriculum that focused on a project approach. Hence, the researcher believed this was an area where an action research project could work to create change in the creative arts for both the children and their teachers.

The research took place at a day-care setting located in a high socio-economic area, and the participants were both the children and staff at the centre. An action research methodology was used which consisted of four phases (MacNaughton & Hughes, 2008), and questionnaires were used to collect the data.

Methodology

An action research methodology was employed for the research of "Our Creative Journey: The Starry Night Project". This methodology consists of a cyclic process, with four phases being worked through within each cycle (Roberts-Holmes, 2011). The four phases are: Phase 1 – choosing to change; Phase 2 – action plan/planning to change; Phase 3 – creating change; and Phase 4 – sharing the lessons of your change (MacNaughton & Hughes, 2008). Each phase aids in gaining an understanding of how to create change within the setting.

Setting.

The setting where this research project took place was a day-care service owned by a large corporation, located in a high socio-economic area in Auckland. The centre is licensed for 20 children aged from four to five years, and has five full-time staff members with a range of early childhood qualifications; it has a 1:8 adult:child ratio. The children are all New Zealand European, and their families are all high socio-economic status. At the time of the research, the teaching team consisted of two full-time qualified and registered early childhood teachers and the researcher, who was a student teacher. At the time of completing the research project, the researcher had been volunteering two days per week and did relief work when required. The researcher had been working in the centre for just on three years.

Participants.

The participants of "Our Creative Journey: The Starry Night Project" included the five full-time staff members. These teachers were selected for their predisposition to implementing artistic and creative experiences for the children.

Data collection methods and analysis strategies.

Data was collected through questionnaires, with each staff member being given the same questionnaire, which they completed in their own time. The questions were all centred on creativity, young children, and the teacher's thoughts and views. The data collected from the questionnaires gave the researcher a better understanding of each teacher's views and perceptions on children's creativity, and from the data it could be investigated if those beliefs were apparent in the teacher's practice. Once the data was collected the researcher began to

analyse the findings, first by categorising the data into different folders based on emerging themes (Roberts-Holmes, 2011). The emergent themes were the curriculum, teachers' views and perspectives, and *process* versus *product*. The qualitative and quantitative data were separated during the analysis process, and from there the information was correlated into tables, figures and charts.

The researcher worked in collaboration with staff and parents during each of the project phases. As the research project had a clear and set goal, namely cultivating in young children an appreciation of their artistic creativity, there was no misinterpreting the project.

Figure 1. Questions Used in the Questionnaire

- Describe what you think creativity is.
- Do you think teachers have an impact on children's creative potential?
- Do you think all children can be artistically creative?
- What was your experience of artistic creativity as a child?
- How do you think teachers can foster young children's artistic creativity?
- Describe what you think creativity is.
- What is your understanding of *process* versus *product*?

Findings

Once the data had been collected and analysed from both a qualitative and quantitative perspective, it was evident that most of the teachers viewed children as creative. Furthermore, all the teachers said the children should be in an environment that allows for explorations, experimentation, space and time to work on creative experiences. The teachers consider their role to be one of supporter and facilitator of resources, and they mentioned on their questionnaires that children should have a wide variety of media and tools openly and readily available for use. The data also indicated that there was a need to rethink and relook at how art experiences were implemented within three major areas, namely the curriculum, the environment, and teachers' views and perceptions.

The next step was for the researcher to have a professional conversation with the teachers involved, so as to share the findings of the first phase of the research and consider the next steps. After much discussion and sharing of ideas, it was decided to make art and creativity the focus for the next month's planning, and during this time to implement our new arts-based Starry Night Project.

The researcher had been introducing the children to various famous artists. Originally it had been the intention of the researcher for the children to look at Monet and his *Water Lilies* paintings, but after one of the children had brought in a book from home containing Vincent Van Gogh paintings, the children decided that they wanted to look at Van Gogh's *Starry Night*. The researcher prepared several images for the children to use as a reference. It took five steps to paint the pictures: step one – the background; step two – clouds, stars and moon; step three – the tree; step four – the hills; and finally, step five – the town. At each step, the teachers and children discussed the various colours and shades that made up each section of the painting. Each child took on the Starry Night Project with individualism.

Figure 2. The Children's Starry Night Images



Discussion

The goal for this research project was to cultivate in young children an appreciation for their artistic creativity. There were three major themes that emerged from the initial research findings: curriculum, environment, and teachers' view and perceptions. A minor theme was process versus product.

Curriculum.

There are numerous references in the literature to research that suggests art-based curricula are beneficial and result in positive outcomes, yet there is nothing concrete to suggest whether an art-based curriculum has an impact on children's learning and development. However, the researcher found in her study that the children developed a sense of self-confidence in their artistic abilities, and this finding aligns with the work of Wright (2003) and Brownlee (1991). Both these researchers stated that implementation of the arts is important because it would assist children to develop theories and learn about the wider world, a view that Schwarz and Luckenbill (2012) and Beghetto (2007) also hold.

Through the implementation of the Starry Night Project, teachers were able to empower the children to use their imaginations and express themselves as individuals. The researcher found that having the balance of a child-centred and teacher-initiated art project like the Starry Night allowed for teachers to build on and extend children's developing skills and abilities. For example, when it came to trying something new, the children had a sound sense of self-worth and confidence in their abilities.

Environment.

The physical environment plays a role in fostering children's artistic creativity (Craft & Jeffery, 2004; Wright, 2003), and this became apparent during the study. The researcher found that having a special space for the children to work on their art, away from traffic flow and designated specifically for the Starry Night Project, had major positive implications, and this finding aligns with research already done by Clark and Jeffery (2004), Edwards and Springate (1995), Schwarz and Luckenbill (2012), and Wright (2003). The special space allowed the children to focus and work on their art work uninterrupted, thus giving them the opportunity to explore their artistic creativity more deeply. The space also gave the children an area to revisit their paintings and work on them as and when they wished. The children took pride in their achievements by having their work displayed. Having the opportunity to

share their paintings with family members built on the children's self-confidence and pride in their work.

The role of the teacher.

It was noticeable how much impact teachers can have on children's creative development and learning. This was evidenced by how the positive interactions between teachers and children during the Starry Night Project built on the children's opinions of themselves as artists. Malaguzzi (as cited in Sharp, 2004) describes "that interaction with adults plays a large role in fostering children's artistic creativity" (p. 8). The children viewed themselves as capable and confident, which was seen in the steps taken to paint their Starry Night pictures. This finding is consistent with other research that suggests that artistic creativity can be fostered when teachers use positive reinforcement with children (Sharp, 2004).

Process versus product.

By breaking down each one of the five steps involved in the painting, the children were able to focus on the process in creating their Starry Night images. In particular, they had the opportunity to explore different methods of applying the paint, and became familiar with different techniques for building up layers. This finding reaffirmed what other researchers such as Brownlee (1991) and Sharp (2004) had already noted.

Conclusions

Overall goal.

The researcher started out with the goal to cultivate in young children an appreciation for their artistic creativity. To achieve this, two research questions were asked: "How can teachers foster young children's artistic creativity?" and "How do teachers' views impact on children creativity?" By completing this study, the researcher has become aware that the implementation of a new arts-based curriculum at the centre has had a profound impact on the children's self-concept and development. The process of implementing the Starry Night Project fostered in children and staff a new understanding of the use of techniques, paint and other media. The limitations of the project were mainly time, and the fact that the researcher was not in the centre full time.

Outcomes of the Starry Night Project.

Evidence of the success of the project could be mainly seen by the positive interactions between the teachers and children, and the development of artistic skills and ability in both children and staff. This positive approach and developing skills also promoted the use of new techniques with paint and other media. The children developed a better understanding of the process it takes to paint a picture, by working through steps starting with the background and building on top of this. Finally, creating a designated art space allowed children uninterrupted time to focus on their artwork, and the opportunity to revisit their paintings when and as they wished.

The researcher would like to see this project extended over a longer period of time, to further explore how teachers can best lay down the foundations for cultivating artistic appreciation in young children, and then see how this impacts on children's perceptions of themselves as artists and the effect it has on their holistic development. It would also be interesting to see what artwork, skills and abilities come from doing a longer research project in this curriculum area.

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