

# Engaging Children in Artworks: Ideas for Generalist Primary Educators

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## Research about the Importance of Art in Education

The value of the arts in engaging children in learning has been recognised by numerous educational experts who have advocated for the value of arts-based pedagogies, multiple ways of knowing and multiple intelligences (Bamford, 2006; Eisner, 2002; Gardner, 1993; Wright, 2003). The recent National Review of Visual Education in Australia described how the current global shift of communication to the visual requires educators to prepare students with the skills to 'create, process, critique and appreciate the spectrum of visual phenomena in the individual's external and internal environment' (Davis, 2008, p. 11). The importance of engaging children in the arts, and specifically visual art, is the focus of this section of the Venice Biennale Art Education Resource.

Many teachers use picture books in their class to stimulate children's interest through viewing images while they simultaneously listen to the text. Artworks also contain stories which can engage children. It is important for the teacher to inform themselves about the artist's background and works in order to be able to facilitate a discussion with the children. It is also essential to look at a diverse range of works from different times and cultures which illustrate how artists have viewed the same theme or topic in a multitude of different ways. Exposure to art from different cultures also helps to develop acceptance of difference in the classroom and promotes tolerance and diversity.

## The Language of Art: Design Elements and Principles

Introducing children to the language of art, the design elements and principles of art is very important and should occur as early as possible. These are commonly agreed on to be: Line, Shape, Tone, Texture, Colour, Contrast, Harmony, Focal Point, Space, Perspective, Balance and Movement. The website Art Lex <<http://www.artlex.com/>> is an art dictionary which contains definitions of art terminology, such as the design elements and principles, as well as information on art movements throughout

history. It also contains illustrations of various artists' works and various techniques and media that are used in the creation of artworks. The following section provides information about what art concepts children can understand and suggestions for when to introduce them from the Kindergarten to the Grade 8 level. Knowing what concepts children can understand can assist in knowing the types of guided questions to construct when discussing artists' works. These are a general guideline as some children will be at various stages of physical and mental development. The following are adapted from Helen Hume's (2000, pp. 30 - 47), A Survival Kit for the Elementary/Middle School Art Teacher.

## A Guide to What Children Should Know in Art: K- 6

### Concepts that Kindergarten Children Understand:

Identify and draw differences in line: thick, thin, zigzag, curved, straight, interrupted; Recognise and draw geometric and free-form shapes; Identify and use light and dark colours; Identify red, yellow, blue, green, violet, and orange, but not whether they are primary or secondary; Make large shapes by combining geometric and free-form shapes; Create pattern by repetition of design; Perceive things that are alike and different; Learn about and use tools in a safe, responsible manner; Recognise differences in art media after introduction and use of various media; and Talk about their work and that of other artists.

### Suggestions for Teaching Kindergarten Children:

It is important to allow kindergarten time to experiment with a range of materials. Encourage them to draw about personal experiences and themselves. It is important to provide guidance to kindergarten children by teaching some techniques and using media through step-by-step instructions. This does not mean that every child's work should look the same as individual expression is very important in art. Kindergarten children often do not feel the need to make colours relate to reality and have little sense of scale – they are the centre of the universe in their art making. At this age they are characteristically quite self-centered so involving each student to make an individual portion of an all-class project develops their social skills.



*Sweet Barrier Reef (installation detail), 2008*

**Concepts that First Grade Children Understand:**

Recognise and describe the use of line in historical artworks; Appreciate rhythm in a work of art such as Vincent van Gogh's *Starry Night*; Understand that form and function go together, e.g. a clay pot must be strong and well built to carry water inside it; Know that artists have designed clothing, buildings, and furniture; See the difference between two-dimensional and three-dimensional work; Discuss subject matter in art; understand differences in still-life, portrait, landscape, seasons; Understand careers, e.g. teacher, police officer, hairdresser, doctor, minister and fire fighter.

**Suggestions for Teaching First Grade Children:**

It is important to teach first grade students one step at a time as they have difficulty understanding more than one idea at a time. At this age they are more aware of people around them and enjoy working in groups. They can therefore be encouraged to talk about their own work and that of others. It is important in first grade to introduce the vocabulary of line, rhythm, shape and space. Ask them to identify line and shape in various environments such as the classroom or on their clothing. On free dress days or for 'show and tell' they can be encouraged to bring something from home or wear something decorated with line or shape. First grade children are able to thread a large-eye needle, tie a knot and do some simple stitchery based on line and shape. At this age they love lessons that are full of activity and fun, can work enthusiastically and be absorbed in creating art and draw what they know, not what they see.

**Concepts that Second Grade Children Understand:**

Become more aware of size relationships in comparing objects and in regard to themselves; Become more aware that things are designed by artists (cars, clothes, kitchen items, furniture buildings); Become aware of themes in artworks from various cultures; are able to add texture that resembles real texture; for example, hair; Understand that personal selections, such as clothing, reflect personal expression; Understand that line can be used to make something appear three-dimensional; Understand positive and negative shapes (may be best done with cut-paper); Describe how atmosphere can be shown by colour differences; Observe design

(pattern, balance) in natural organisms such as butterflies, insects and in art; Recognise differences in art media.

**Suggestions for Teaching Second Grade Children:**

It is important for second grade children to be introduced to unfamiliar art forms and materials such as those being used by contemporary artists in the Venice Biennale. They can be introduced to value differences, mixing tints and shades of colour and using transparent and opaque colours (Look at the suggested K-6 art activities for Ken Yonetani's work). In second grade children are able to combine found materials in sculpture (such as in the work of Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro). Discuss with the children the importance of not using symbols in their work, such as drawing a sun with rays, stick figures, pointy mountains and "balloon" trees. At this age second grade children are extremely confident and willing to tackle anything in their artwork. They are open to new experiences, welcome responsibility and love nature, imaginary creatures and fantasy.

**Concepts that Third Grade Children Understand:**

Use overlapping shapes, variation in lines, textures, colours and sizes; Comprehend foreground, middle ground and background, and show these in various ways; Discriminate between warm and cool colours and can identify how artists have used colour for expression; Define symmetrical, asymmetrical, and radial balance; Identify columns, beams, domes and arches, and analyse how a building is constructed; Develop personal use of colour and other elements effectively in two-dimensional work; Become aware of articulation of parts of the human figure.

**Suggestions for Teaching Third Grade Children:**

Encourage children in the third grade to create a non-objective work of art through the introduction of historical artworks. It is also important to teach them how to see such as through contour drawing of a hand and the human figure. Discuss the proportions of the human form and ask them to draw their classmates as models (see the suggested K-6 activities for Shaun Gladwell). Children of this age are very interested in learning to draw realistically so

guidance is very important. It is essential to be clear about your objectives at the beginning of the lesson and then to evaluate with the student halfway through the lesson to see how they are meeting the objectives of their work. Talk about how things work, such as buildings and machinery, with specific focus on form and function. Take the children outside to draw flowers, trees, animals and plants so they can see there are many different ways to draw, for example a mountain. Third grade children also enjoy art gallery visits and learning about the role of artists in society. They are enthusiastic, open to new experiences and using new materials.

**Concepts that Fourth Grade Children Understand:**

Comprehend colour scheme based on colour wheel: warm/cool, contrasting mood, "grayed" colours; Develop a more realistically proportioned human figure with movement; Become aware of how artist depict animals and the human figure by looking at various artworks; Can identify different media, subject matter, and art forms such as sculpture, tempera, watercolour, prints, portraits, landscapes; comprehend that form follows function in design, and can point out or bring in specific examples; Understand that many artists express themselves and their cultural identities through their artwork; Recognise architecture from various climates and cultures of the world based on the construction materials used, including their own regional architecture.

**Suggestions for Teaching Fourth Grade Children:**

At the four grade level children are able to discuss aesthetics issues through questions such as: "Could something ugly be art?" "Should the artist care whether other people appreciate what he or she is doing?" "Why might a mountain look different depending on which culture paints them?" At this stage they are not yet able to judge if an artwork is 'good' or 'bad' but are able to say if they like or dislike an artwork. Children in fourth grade are also developing a sense of humour and love comics and cartoon characters.

**Concepts that Fifth Grade Children Understand:**

Learn that sculptors are sometimes commissioned to do monumental artwork for public places; Respect that sculptural materials must be used appropriately, or the sculpture may disintegrate; Recognise the influence of geographic and climatic conditions on building materials used in private homes and public buildings; Recognise differences in artworks from a variety of cultures; Recognise the artist's intention in using ideas and using colour to create mood; Identify symbols, natural images, and objects used to create artworks; Understand and use several different ways of showing depth (overlapping differences in colour and size, rudimentary perspective); Discriminate that light, distance, relative size, and motion affect the appearance of an object.

**Suggestions for Teaching Fifth Grade Children:**

At the fifth grade level it is important for children to be able to discuss and identify strengths and weaknesses in their own work. Encourage them to use design elements and principles when involved in this type of analysis. It is important to continue to introduce many different styles of art and discuss whether something has to 'real' to express the artist's idea. Include research assignments on different artists at this year level. Fifth grade children are eager to help and take on additional responsibility, they also work well in groups and are open-minded to creative problem solving. It is therefore important to undertake group projects and to enlist students in helping to hang artworks, organise materials and also undertake special art duties such as cleaning brushes etc. Review the concepts of realism, abstraction, positive and negative space, light and shadow and texture. At this age some students lose confidence in their artistic ability because they believe their drawings are not 'real' enough. For this reason it is important to introduce one and two point perspective.

**Concepts that Sixth Grade Children Understand:**

Understand one and two point perspective concepts and want to learn how to show depth in their work; Open to learning new, difficult technical skills in drawing, painting, printmaking and sculpture; Judge works by formalist (elements and principles of art), emotionalism (the viewer's emotional reaction to the artwork), and realism (the belief that the best art closely resembles reality); Understands the elements and principles of art, and is able to identify them in their artwork and that of others; Identify functions of architecture for worship, burial, and public and private use.

**Suggestions for Teaching Sixth Grade Children:**

At this age it is important to base as many projects as you can on self, such as through self-portraits and drawings of the human form (See the suggested K-6 activities for Vernon Ah Kee). It is also important to help develop abstract thinking through giving several different three-dimensional projects (See the suggested K-6 activities for Claire Healy & Sean Cordeiro). Children in sixth grade also enjoy undertaking research projects on artists and presenting them to the class. In terms of artwork they respond positively to seeing their work on display. They are particularly interested in what contemporary artists are doing and have begun to form strong opinions on certain kinds of art and artists. It is important to engage children in ongoing discussions about the influence of society on the type of art that is created and the place of the artist in society. Engaging in aesthetic discussions about non-realistic works of art and different cultural standards is very important in developing aesthetic awareness. Finally, help them to progress sufficiently in their art skills so they will want to continue learning, rather than concluding that because they may not draw realistically, they are not 'artists'.

**Strategies to Engage Children in Artwork**

It is important to give children time to become familiar with an artwork. Encourage them through an open class discussion to talk about what they think is happening in the artwork. Depending on the artwork this discussion could be guided by questions such as: What do you think the artwork is about? Why do you think the artist made this artwork? What do you think the artist is trying to say or do by

creating this artwork? When do you think this artwork was created? These questions will enable the children to listen to other people's opinions and help to extend their own thinking about the work. The teacher can then follow up with some details that they know about the artist such as something about the background of the artist, their family, why they became an artist and why they have chosen this particular medium and subject matter.

***A Mystery Bag***

The teacher chooses an artwork they would like the children to engage with. They place this artwork on an easel at the front of the classroom and drape it with a black cloth. Alternatively the teacher could use two pieces of black paper to cover the artwork. One piece for the top half and the bottom piece for the second half. Through their investigation of the artist's background and the work itself they choose approximately 5 – 6 objects which they put into a 'mystery bag'. The bag should be opaque and preferably made of interesting material to attract the students' interest. As each item is pulled out of the bag the teacher asks the children to think about what the object is, the colours it has, what it means and how it makes them feel. If the children were engaging with, for example, the work of Shaun Gladwell and his investigation of place the teacher might include objects such as: a photograph of a house, a tourist brochure of Australia, the DVD of 'Australia' the movie, a pair of sunglasses, a tube of sunburn cream and a stuffed Australian animal toy. The links that could be made to his work are the notion of home and how people can feel when they do not have a home and are displaced; the tourist brochure, DVD and stuffed toy could be used to discuss how Australia is represented and whether this is the 'true' Australia; the sunglasses could be used to discuss how sunglasses can be used to protect us from sunlight but can also be used as a device by people who do not want people to see what they are thinking; the tube of sunscreen can be linked Australia's harsh conditions, another important aspect of Gladwell's work.

Once the children have discussed the objects the teacher can ask them to make associations between the objects. They may respond with comments such as the objects are all linked because they refer

to holidays, camping or travelling. Then the children can be asked about how the objects make them feel. At this stage they may say that home is their favourite place, they like watching movies with their family and they have lots of favourite stuffed toys at home which make them feel comfortable. The teacher then unveils the bottom half of the artwork and asks the children to look carefully at it at the same time encouraging the children to use design elements and principles such as: line, colour, shape, tone, texture, colour, contrast, harmony, focal point, space, perspective, balance and movement to talk about the work. The whole work is then revealed to the class and the students are encouraged to link the objects from the mystery bag to the ideas in the artwork. The teacher provides the class with further information about the artist and the artwork to further the students' knowledge. This activity can be extended to a literacy activity in which students write about their understanding of the work, what they think the artist is saying, or they may wish to pretend to be one of the characters in the work and write about what they are doing. This could take the form of a series of diary entries as they write down what they have been doing that week. A further extension could be to investigate an art movement linked to an artist's work. For example Surrealism which uses super realistic images in dreamlike settings which could be linked to Gladwell's work.

#### **Post-It Notes**

The teacher chooses three diverse artworks to display in the classroom and beside each writes down the artist's name, the title of the work, the size and the media used. Each student is given three post-it notes and a texta. If possible, it is important for each child to have a different coloured texta. As the teacher hands the textas out they put the coloured dot of the texta next to each child's name on the roll which helps to track the student's progress through this activity.

The children are asked to look carefully at the three different artworks and decide on one word which they believe describes or expresses what the artwork says to them. If the children are looking at the Australian artists in the Venice Biennale they might use: lonely

(Gladwell); powerful (Ah Kee); dead (Yonetani); and busy (Healy & Cordeiro). The children are asked to write down their words and place them around the outside of the artwork so that the image can still be seen. An important guideline for this activity is that once a word has been placed on the artwork it cannot be used again. If this happens the student will need to cross out the word they have used and write another. This activity is very good for increasing vocabulary and also provides a way for children to see how to spell words they may not have used before. The teacher can correct any misspellings and take note of which student may have trouble with spelling and vocabulary through the colour texta which has been used.

The teacher can then utilise the words that have been used by asking different students why they associated their particular word with the artwork. This can extend the discussion to how the artwork makes the children feel. Through background reading the teacher can provide more information about the artist and the artwork as part of this engagement.

#### **Guided Questions**

A series of guiding questions can be used by the teacher to help children focus on sculptural artworks which are predominant in the work of the Australian artists at the Venice Biennale this year. These can include: When was the artwork made? Who made it? What is the title of the work? What materials is the work made from? How do you think the work was made? Why was the artwork made? Where can you find the artwork? How is the artwork presented? (Photograph, Site-specific) What type of artwork is it? (e.g. painting, sculpture, installation?) When looking at 2-dimensional work questions could include: What is the subject matter of the artwork? What types of colours have been used? How do these colours make you feel? How has line been used in the artwork? What types of shapes have been used? Has tone been used in the artwork to create depth? How has the artist used space in the work? Can you tell where the light (if any) is coming from in the work? How does the work make you feel? Do you feel engaged with the subject matter of the artwork? How has the artist used the elements and principles of design to compose their work? What do you think the theme of the work is?

These activities can all provide useful and effective ways to engage children in a range of artworks and in the process learn more about art and their world.

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