LESSONS LEARNT FROM THE HISTORY OF PRIMARY VISUAL ARTS EDUCATION IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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Abstract

Visual arts education in Australia has undergone significant changes since the 1950s, particularly in the primary school years. An interest in the history of visual arts education, and how it has shaped visual arts pedagogy and curriculum, motivated a narrative inquiry research project to document the experiences of 21 visual arts educators in Western Australia. The participants’ stories were primarily documented through open-ended interviews; however, some participants also wrote letters to the researchers and shared documents from their lived experience in visual arts education. All of the participants had studied visual arts as school students, and gone on to become visual arts teachers, artist-teachers, senior visual arts advisors, researchers, policy and curriculum writers, and advocates for visual arts education. Sharing narratives of visual arts education from the past 66 years has illuminated the history of policy and teaching practice in primary school visual arts, including stereotypes and public perceptions, pedagogical models employed in curricula, and international influences that shaped visual arts education. Reflecting on these narratives has given rise to four ‘lessons’ that can be learnt from history and applied to contemporary visual arts education.

Introduction

In Australia, visual arts education has experienced many transformations; from technical drawing and trade skills within curricula to the inclusion of art criticism and the development of student as artist, and in pedagogy, from the specialist to the generalist teacher and debates about arts inclusion or exclusion in classroom practice. Elliot Eisner advocated for the arts because they “teach children how to exercise judgment and cope with the unexpected … [To] know the facts, but understand them and be able to think in imaginative, complex and critical ways” (Eisner, 2003, p. 1). In Western Australia (WA), visual arts has experienced decline since the late 1980s, particularly in terms of specialist visual arts teachers and in the time allocated to teaching visual arts (both within schools and in higher education) (Alter, Hayes, & O’Hara, 2009b; Dinham, 2007; Lummis, Morris, & Paolino, 2014). This decline has been particularly prominent in the primary education context, and has coincided with the rise of international testing and increased emphasis on literacy and numeracy (Berlach & McNaught, 2007; Berlach & Power, 2005; Webster & Wolfe, 2013). However, this is not the first time that visual arts has been considered an ‘impoverished’ subject (to quote Eisner’s (1978) article). Prior to the 1970s, visual arts comprised small ‘one-off’ activities, with the 1970s and 1980s marking a time of unprecedented change and equity for visual arts education, as visual arts received tertiary entrance subject status. The history of visual arts education, including the rise of visual arts in 1970s-1980s WA, may offer some lessons that contemporary educators can apply to encourage the inclusion of visual arts (and the arts more generally) in policy and practice.

This research project sought to document the collective narrative of visual arts educators in WA, who have lived experience of the history of visual arts from the 1950s to contemporary practice. Documenting this history was important as limited records can be found on the history of visual arts in
WA within the public domain. For researchers who wish to explore how the past has shaped present visual arts education practice there is limited written information that is accessible, as most non-electronic records have been archived or misplaced over time. This paper shares a narrative constructed from the interviews conducted, and triangulated with literature where possible. After each small section of history is a lesson for contemporary practice, which have emerged in discussions with the research participants in response to the questions, “Where do you think visual arts education is going currently? What is your wish for visual arts education in WA?”

Research Method

This research project involved documenting the collective narrative of 21 experienced WA visual arts educators across primary, secondary and tertiary education sectors. The research project was guided by the constructivist paradigm where the researchers, as visual arts specialist teachers, would co-construct new knowledge with participants by empathising with their experiences, and through slowly weaving parts of a collective narrative together where stories of visual arts education overlapped (Creswell, 2014). The participants in this project had held a number of positions within WA visual arts education, including curriculum writers, senior visual arts advisors, researchers, artist-teachers, and advocates for The Arts. The participants were selected from a convenience sample, with snowball sampling also used. An initial selection of participants was made based on past careers, to ensure a sample that represented primary, secondary and tertiary sectors; public and private school sectors; teaching, research and advocacy career roles. Participants from this initial sample then suggested other individuals who could also add to the narrative. This process continued until information about the key historical events reached saturation and were triangulated through member checking. The majority of those interviewed had served in the WA Education Department during their career; however, some had worked in the Catholic and Independent school sectors. Some of the participants had entered visual arts education as students during the 1950s, with the youngest of the participants experiencing visual arts education as students in the 1980s-1990s. All of the participants had undertaken school-based and tertiary study in visual arts prior to commencing their careers.

A narrative inquiry approach was used to gather data as the aim of the project was to record the cultural history of visual arts education in WA, as many of the historical records on this topic have been lost. A narrative inquiry approach involves engaging participants in conversation about their lived experiences and social interactions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000); in this case the researchers spoke to participants about their professional life experiences as visual arts educators. Re-storying was a key aspect of the data analysis and presentation, as it allowed the researchers to triangulate sources to present a chronological sequence of history from the 1950s to the disestablishment of the Art and Crafts Branch of the Education Department in 1987:

Restorying is the process of gathering stories, analyzing them for key elements of the story (e.g., time, place, plot, and scene), and then rewriting the story to place it within a chronological sequence. Often when individuals tell a story, this sequence may be missing or not logically developed, and by restorying, the researcher provides a causal link among ideas. (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002, p. 332)

Re-storying was a particularly important process in this research as the participants had a broad range of experiences and all contributed their perception of events from their lived experience. The researchers then wove together the individual stories into a collective narrative that allowed a logical sequence, and a chronology of key events (as identified by participants) to emerge. Once an initial story was written, the researchers employed triangulation with documentary analysis to confirm or change the story. A content analysis was conducted on documents such as past curricula and teaching programmes, as well as available literature on the history of art education in Australia. The final re-storied narrative was sent for member checking, as participants read over both original transcripts and the re-storied narratives to check for their credibility.

The researchers were granted ethics clearance from the University’s Human Research Ethics
Committee prior to undertaking the research processes, and the initial narratives were collected through semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured questions guided the participants’ recollections of the events during the associated time period, while allowing flexibility for participants to share their lived experiences in their own words. All of the participants completed at least one 60 minute interview, although in some cases the participants wished to have a second interview or sent the researchers other documentary material or correspondence with further information. Digital audio recordings from the interviews were sent to an independent academic transcription company. After the transcriptions were completed the researchers identified key themes (events and ‘turning points’ in visual arts education) through inductive coding and frequency analysis of key words, and assembled shared knowledge from the narratives prior to triangulating the narrative with the documents and employing member checking (Guba & Lincoln, 2000; Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002).

This paper represents the overall re-storied narrative of these participants; with the stories being included in italics. The collective narrative is important as it presents a more holistic view of key turning points in the history of visual arts education in WA. Furthermore, as many of the participants were and are public figures in arts education in WA the process of re-storying allowed for their anonymity to be preserved, while still affording them an opportunity to share their experiences. After each section of history in this paper a ‘lesson’ that can be applied to contemporary visual arts education practice is offered, based on the findings of the historical narratives presented and the participants responses to the final interview questions: “Where do you think visual arts education is going currently? What is your wish for visual arts education in WA?” The history presented (with exception to the background section) is organised chronologically, to reflect the transitions in visual arts education from 1950s to the disestablishment of the Arts and Crafts Branch in 1987.

**Background to Visual Arts in WA**

The research participants spoke in detail about the history they experienced. A brief background of visual arts education in WA is outlined here in order to contextualise the information presented by the participants. From the 1940s until the late 1980s the WA Department of Education employed Subject Superintendents to control the curriculum and syllabus interests of their respective subjects across both primary and secondary schooling. The Subject Superintendents were central to WA’s secondary education sector, and specifically to the former Matriculation Examination process that determined year 12 students’ entrance into WA’s only university at the time, the University of Western Australia (UWA) (Dettman, 1969). WA had two prominent Art and Crafts Superintendents, Jock Campbell (1938 -1971) and Ray Sampson (1972-1987); however, the Better Schools Report (Pearce, 1987) resulted in the disestablishment of the role of Subject Superintendents. Throughout this paper the term art and crafts is used to reflect the historical position of what used to be art or fine art (now referred to as visual arts) as well as craft, which was a distinct subject to art because it included activities such as: pottery, leather work, sewing, basket weaving and other traditional folk crafts (Education Department Curriculum Branch, 1974). Today, the Australian Curriculum positions visual arts as one subject within The Arts Learning Area (dance, drama, media arts, music and visual arts) (ACARA, 2014). The current subject of visual arts in WA includes both fine arts and craft techniques (School Standards and Curriculum Authority, 2015).

**The Low Status of Visual Arts Education During the 1950s-1970s**

During the conversations with the experienced WA visual arts educators, there was a commonality in the perceived low status of visual arts as a discipline. In summary:

> There was an intellectual prejudice against visual arts education, and a stigma when one suggested they may pursue a career in visual arts or visual arts education. There was an awareness of the poor public status of our subject. Many of us as students experienced situations where our parents tried very hard to persuade us not to seek a career in the visual arts. Those who still wished to forge a career in Perth could not attend the traditional university (UWA), as visual arts was not offered there. Subsequently, we were
forced into diploma and associate diploma visual arts courses at the Perth Technical College, whilst our former secondary school peers secured university degrees and higher salaries. Even though it was possible to attain a Master of Education, Master of Arts or Doctoral degree within the area of visual arts/visual arts education, it often was a result of compensating technical school visual arts qualifications with extra study at other Australian and overseas universities (usually in America or the United Kingdom) to gain academic recognition.

During the 1950s, art and crafts in WA primary schools was a lowly regarded subject. This was despite the publication of syllabus material, as well as the select number of advisory staff with secondary teaching experience that mentored primary teachers to stimulate student interest in visual arts. Sporadic art and crafts activities emphasised the making of products, often described as one-off decorative Art and Crafts lessons. This experience was replicated for many primary school children during the 1950s, 1960s and into early 1970s, until the WA Education Department’s Art and Crafts Branch introduced primary visual arts specialist teachers (Lummis, Morris, & Lock, 2016).

Lesson One: Promote Visual Arts to the Wider Community … A Career in the Arts Does Not Mean Poverty

The perceived low status of visual arts education still exists in WA schools. There is an ongoing perception that visual arts is an easy subject, a hobby, an informal activity. Secondary school students have gone so far as to say that “if you are an artist you’ll starve … maybe [I’ll do art] as a side job” (Morris, 2015). There is a sense that “in the arts, remuneration rests largely on relative performance. Slight differences in performance can lead to large income differentials” (Abbing, 2008, p. 108). The notion of risk associated with income leads students to pursue different non-arts based careers. Lower enrolments in visual arts courses increases budget cuts and limits courses. This is not only the case in Australia, but also in the United States of America where, “The Los Angeles Unified School District cut the arts education budget by 76% between 2007 and 2012” (Thomas, Singh, & Klopfenstein, 2015, p. 329). As such, “many [USA] school districts report reducing instructional time in the arts to allow more time for math and English” (Thomas et al., 2015, p. 329). In WA schools, similar practices are occurring. Visual arts is not being promoted, as teachers need to teach one visual subject (either visual arts or media arts) each year and the early years of schooling are to primarily focus on literacy and numeracy (K-10 syllabus). The focus on literacy and numeracy has permeated WA primary schooling, with the National Assessment Plan – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) causing teacher and student wellbeing issues, such as increased stress (Rogers, Barblett, & Robinson, 2016). This kind of de-emphasis of visual arts in primary schooling does not encourage students to maintain an arts practice throughout secondary schooling and into a career. It also marginalises the positive therapeutic benefits the arts have (Efland, 2002), in favour of increasing the amount of school work in subject areas that could improve Australia’s rank in national and international standardised testing (Gorur & Wu, 2015; Morris, 2015).

In addition to other schooling pressures, some suggest that the notion of the ‘starving artist’ should be retained as this myth could motivate financial support for those who do pursue careers in the arts:

"It appears that governments, as well as foundations, corporations, and private donors are particularly sensitive about poverty in the arts. The image of the starving artist appeals to benefactors. Helping a poor artist is more rewarding than helping other kinds of poor people … there is a small chance that the artist receiving assistance will eventually become a great artist. (Abbing, 2008, pp. 128-129)"

But is a motivation that warrants support? Other schools are promoting success for graduates who finish arts degrees having also learnt about the business of arts and how to drive creative enterprise ("No starving artist here," 2009). There is also growing support for the notion of the ‘celebrity artist’; someone who “has acquired celebrity status, rather than a celebrity who also paints or engages in art-based activities” (Fillis, 2015, p. 647). The artist with celebrity status is not a particularly new concept, with Fillis (2015) citing Pablo Picasso and Salvador Dali as 20th century celebrities; however, it provides a counter-argument to that of the starving artist. Visual arts education advocates and early
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childhood researchers in particular cite the importance of visual arts experiences in building empathy, visual thinking skills, motor skills, visual perception, imagination and relationships (Alter et al., 2009b; Arnhem, 1969; Efland, 2002; Eisner, 2003; Zučančič, Čagran, & Mulej, 2015). If the arts are to remain within schools, and a promoted part of school then it is the counter-argument to the starving artist that needs to be shared with students, parents, non-arts teachers and the wider community.

The Mid-1970s and a Re-Evaluation of Visual Arts Education

The 1970s marked a time of unprecedented change across the Australian kindergarten to year 12 (K-12) arts education. As advocates of the visual arts, the participants identified government initiatives that supported the changing status of visual arts education:

Arts educators were trying to define the place of The Arts and to discuss the commonalities of The Arts subjects, which were to be addressed by the Australia Council-Schools Commission Study of Education and the Arts Report [see (Richardson, 1978)]. The McKinnon (1977) Report addressed issues of equity and participation in The Arts and in WA visual arts received more support than it had previously. As a result of the McKinnon Report, WA primary schools had access to a music, physical education or visual arts specialist teacher from the 1970s to the 1990s. The specialisation programmes were supported by the Whitlam Labor Government, with extra money providing opportunities for innovation. In addition, art and crafts education was also becoming strongly influenced by American researchers and curricula ideas including: art history, responding to art and visual theory [see (Barkan, 1962; Dorn, 1972; Eisner, 1972; Greer, 1987; Hubbard & Rouse, 1977)].

Prior to the political initiatives of the Whitlam Labor era, Perth’s art and crafts education discourse was already beginning to react to initiatives taking place in the United States. Barkan (1962) claimed that visual arts education was, “well beyond the threshold of a period of accelerated transition . . . [and] the next decade will bring some truly fundamental changes” (p. 12). By the 1970s a new America curriculum had been mandated inclusive of an aesthetics domain; however, it was not well received in California (Dorn, 1972). Despite the initial reaction, many scholars supported the model by the end of the 1960s:

The California arts educators’ dilemma with the new framework was most recently identified in a survey of first year implementation results … it would appear from the implementation report, [Visual Arts teachers] do not understand nor empathize with most of the disciplinary notions advanced. (Dorn, 1972, p. 26)

Once the curriculum was mandated, even resistant visual arts teachers had no choice but to implement the new programme, inclusive of visual arts theory. Teaching visual arts theory was daunting for many teachers, as they had not experienced any theory during their teacher training. Dorn’s (1972) response to the dissatisfaction of visual arts teachers was to suggest that the 1970s would be regarded as a time when practice was privileged over theory, and in which only theory that had practical and achievable outcomes should be disseminated (Dorn, 1972). He argued that educators need to accept visual arts as a discipline, and that it was futile to expect students to be historians, as it was not a reflection of reality beyond the school environment (Dorn, 1972). Dorn’s perspective was part of the ongoing conversation in the WA context over several decades. Many of the participants were influenced by visual arts educators in California, such as Charles Dorn and Elliot Eisner:

During the 1970s many of us visited California, including Stanford University. Subsequently, we met many of the active American researchers in visual arts at the time who shared our belief that arts practice was an essential part of visual arts education, and that it was important for teachers to also privilege their own art making. It was preferential to travel to America rather than to the east coast of Australia to pursue higher degrees in education because Perth is so isolated that if you were going to travel to undertake higher education, you wanted to do so in an exciting international context! Often the catalyst for pursuing a higher degree in America was that our partners were already participating in that context. It made sense for us to also do further study while
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we were overseas. Some of us also joined up with other Australian colleagues and we kept in touch after returning to Perth. This gave us an opportunity to share the American research with the Perth visual arts teaching community. This information was often shared through the Art Education Association of WA, of which most visual arts teachers were members.

The benefit of establishing strong links with American researchers was that we were able to secure two international guest speakers for an Art Education Association of WA conference in August 1978. We had a keynote presentation by Elliot Eisner from Stamford University and also a presentation by Brian Allison from the United Kingdom. The relationship with Elliot Eisner endured until his death in January 2014. Many of us had formed close relationships with the Eisner family.

The biggest change visual arts in WA experienced during this period was the subject gaining tertiary entrance status in 1984. However, gaining this status came at a cost: In order for this new status to be realised, the upper secondary syllabus had to change ... It had to be inclusive of art history, visual theory and ideas introducing aesthetics. The inclusion of these topics in the curriculum was a challenge for many teachers, who were mostly practice-led. There was always a debate about the appropriate balance between studio practice and historical and cultural aspects. There was also a frustration around the fact that visual arts was not seen as intellectually rigorous enough in its own right to be a tertiary entrance subject, not without the art history component.

Lesson Two: Art Making is Important Too

WA had a history of privileging art making in visual arts courses, as a result of the technical college training experienced by most visual arts educators. These educators then taught visual arts at teachers’ colleges, and as such, advocated the practice-led approach. When visual arts was introduced as a tertiary entrance subject in WA it was a requirement to include art theory, as this gave visual arts its ‘intellectual rigour’ (Boughton, 1989; Lummis, 1986). This challenged the existing practice-led focus of the educators of the time.

Visual arts theory is still used as a differentiator between university-entrance visual arts and school-based courses in the current WA curriculum. The use of visual arts theory in this way could diminish the important skills learnt through studio practice. Walker (2014) explains that making art improves two skills, to communicate ideas visually and to understand materiality. There is a recent trend to focus on materials and give limited time to developing students’ conceptualisation of ideas:

It is not uncommon today for students to graduate from high school with a strong grasp of artistic skillsets but with little understanding of art as a reflexive, expressive, or problem-solving process or a tool for communication and understanding. (Walker, 2014, p. 288)

Art making encourages students to develop both their physical skills as well as their communication of ideas (Gates, 2016; van de Kamp, Admiraal, van Drie, & Rijlaarsdam, 2014; Walker, 2014), consistent to be part of art production in a visual culture age (Duncum, 2010). The rationale for visual arts in both State and National curricula supports Walker, as argues for students to be both active consumers and producers of visual artworks, and to understand the influence of culture and context on their works (ACARA, 2014; School Standards and Curriculum Authority, 2015). For students to graduate from school and be active art contributors, they require a foundation of problem solving skills and material understandings, which is learnt through the creation of artworks (Haywood Rolling Jr., 2011). The inquiry process undertaken in the visual arts classroom, where students explore ideas and refine their concepts until they settle on a final version, is also very similar to the design process undertaken by professional designers (Vande Zande, Warnock, Nikoomanesh, & Van Dexter, 2014). Therefore, giving students the opportunity to learn the power of creative decision making on the outcome of their work has implications for both their schooling and work life. This is not to say that all the choices should be made by children (as it is advocated in Cizek’s child art approach (Efland, 1990; Macdonald, 1970)), but to encourage the intellectual practices that occur in an authentic arts practice. Consequently, the art teacher becomes a guide:
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... to assist [his/] her students in exploring and executing their own ideas ... [modelling] how to use various ideas organizers and facilitate student conversation rather than lecture about a culture or idea on which their prints must all be based. (Gates, 2016, p. 18)

The WA Art and Crafts Branch of the Education Department 1975-1987

During the mid-1970s the WA Education Department’s Art and Crafts Branch reflected international trends by offering extensive professional learning that promoted the training of primary visual arts specialist teachers, similar to the USA (Barkan, 1962; Lummis et al., 2016). WA visual arts teachers who were interested in being progressive would talk about Elliot Eisner and what was happening in the United Kingdom. For some teachers ‘being noticed’ was a way to be invited to become a specialist teacher:

After graduating it seemed that every art and craft idea I brought into my school from College was novel, so I just went for it with my kids and started making things. I guess I was noticed, because I was asked to become a primary visual arts specialist. The Art and Crafts Superintendent said it was our job to mentor the classroom teacher by encouraging them to stay in the class with the kids during visual arts. It was a very successful approach until the Director General and the Union decided to use specialist teachers for general teacher release for duties other than teaching time (DOTT).

Much of the reform in WA was stimulated by financial support from the Whitlam Labor Government (1972-1975), and the advocacy of then Federal Minister for Education Kim Beazley Senior (Tully, 2002). The 1970s and 1980s were intense due to the promotion of the arts in WA. The McGaw and Beazley Reports added to the policy mix, as McGaw advocated marginalising the arts and Beazley suggested it should be more integrated in the curriculum (Beazley, 1984; McGaw, 1984). Research participants who were working in the Education Department were writing and trialling new secondary courses for the tertiary entrance subject of visual arts:

Everyone at the Education Department was frantically managing the changes and trialling new material. A new syllabus had to be released when the Art Education Association of WA convinced the Senate at the University of Western Australia to recognise art as a tertiary entrance subject. The new Secondary Art syllabus gaining full university entrance status was the ‘icing on the cake’. It was an exciting time for secondary Visual Arts teachers, who had often felt like second-class teachers in their schools. This time was exciting as teachers no longer felt like their subject was marginalised in schools, as visual arts had previously been marketed for the ‘non-academic’ students.

The improved status of secondary arts meant more financial support was given to primary visual arts specialists programmes, to ensure that primary school students were receiving a quality arts education prior to their secondary schooling. This approach by the Art and Crafts Superintendent was based on a realisation, shared by many senior educators, who claimed primary school teachers had limited skills and knowledge in visual arts. As visual arts had just received tertiary entrance subject status, the Superintendent wanted to fund professional learning for a number of specialist visual arts primary teachers, who could facilitate high quality arts experiences for students, so they would have a good basis of skills that they could take to secondary school. He believed that this approach would result in higher quality secondary visual art students who would excel in the Tertiary Entrance Examination and provide evidence that supported the inclusion of visual arts as a university entrance subject. The need for visual arts specialists was explained in some situations as being:

Necessary because teaching in primary schools in those days was very territorial. It was my class and I was meant to teach everything, and have ownership of everything. Principals and Superintendents recognised that there were a number of primary teachers who were not highly skilled in teaching art and crafts. In fact if you leave a primary teacher on their own to teach all things, it's pretty much art and crafts that gets Friday afternoon at two o’clock. Oh we'll do some Art before we go home.
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Where schools did not have a specialist teacher it was often up to parents to fill the void, with some mothers and artists coming into school to teach some skills. However, all of the professional learning and specialist teachers came to an end in 1987 with the disestablishment of the Arts and Crafts Branch within the Education Department (Lummis et al., 2016). The advocacy for the visual arts ended, as five arts subjects came into one learning area, and each subject competed for its own advocacy and financial support from the Department.

Lesson Three: Promote Positivity in Visual Arts

Since the early 2000s there has been reports around the decreasing time and attention to the arts in schools. These reports directly contrast the support for visual arts specialisation at all levels of schooling advocated during the 1970s and 1980s. In fact, we have also written about the limited amount of instruction provided in the tertiary sector for primary pre-service teachers in the recent past (Lummis et al., 2014; Morris & Lummis, 2014). However, the history showed that with positive messages that build interest in the arts there can be an increase in instructional time and support for visual arts education. A ‘win’ for secondary visual arts in achieving tertiary entrance examination status had a positive effect on the primary arts as well, as it improved support and professional learning for primary visual arts specialist teachers. In the literature on engagement and motivation, it is clear that positive experiences builds an individual’s competence and interest to sustain participation in an activity (Carbonneau, Vallerand, & Lafrenière, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2006). Without an argument for the necessity of visual arts specialist teachers and a dedicated branch of the Education Department, things perished. Without creating interest and necessity in teaching visual arts at any level of schooling, things can perish. Similarly, creating negative experiences in visual arts where a student feels incompetent or unsupported will also lead to their disengagement from the activity (Bandura, 2012; Bandura & Locke, 2003). Boyd and Cutcher (2015) discuss the idea of educating creativity out of students. If students have access to art materials and are given time to practice they are highly motivated and enthusiastic (Boyd & Cutcher, 2015; Gates, 2016). These students progress through school and are motivated to continue their arts practice (Morris, 2015). The promotion of the arts, and arguments for the essentialness of the arts in the 21st century (Freedman & Stuhr, 2011; Wilson, 2011) support the promotion and increased value of the arts in schools.

There is another lesson from building interest, and that is the concept of an artist-teacher. In the 1970s and 1980s, WA promoted the concept of having specialist teachers who were also practising artists. It seems to be a trend that is returning in WA in contemporary times, and also being driven by the a/r/tography research methodology. In a/r/tography the researcher negotiates the roles of artist-teacher-researcher, exploring how each role shapes the others and applying lessons learnt along the way through their art making and writing (Springgay, Irwin, & Wilson Kind, 2005). In other contexts, the artist-teacher is someone who values professional improvement and often maintains their own arts practice alongside their teaching (Thornton, 2011). The National Art Education Association has even promoted an Artist Teacher Scheme to support the concept (Thornton, 2011). In the artist-teacher model, there is a value for the teacher as a guide, a fellow artist who can explore practice-led work with their students (Hoekstra, 2015). Promoting visual arts to students as an artist-teacher could also further improve the status of visual arts, through students who go on to careers in the arts or who sustain their practice after compulsory schooling.

The Release of the Arts and Crafts Syllabus K-7

The final period of history discussed with research participants was the release of the Arts and Crafts Syllabus Kindergarten-7 (K-7) (Ministry of Education Curriculum Branch, 1987), which occurred just prior to the closure of the Arts and Crafts Branch.

The syllabus was developed and supported by the advisory visual arts teachers who worked within the Branch as well as Superintendent Ray Sampson. It was released in 1987 by the Chief Executive Education Officer Dr Warren Louden, after continual lobbying by the Art Education Association of WA and many of the visual arts teachers who had worked on the syllabus for several years. The project was nearly lost in the
The restructuring of the Education Department and Bill Louden was extremely helpful in ensuring the survival of the many years of hard work as a member of the Education Department team.

The Arts and Crafts Syllabus K-7 incorporated much of the USA Strand Approach to art education, published by Hubbard and Rouse (Hubbard & Rouse, 1977). The Strand Approach was a linear approach to project organisation, and in the WA Arts and Crafts Syllabus K-7 this approach was termed Carrier Projects (Ministry of Education, 1989). As explained by past Education Department personnel, the Carrier Project was a term introduced by the Art and Crafts Subject Superintendent around 1984 to explain the pedagogical approach to visual arts making that was used within the syllabus. The carrier projects were presented as a sequence of three activities, from visual inquiry to visual product (Ministry of Education Curriculum Branch, 1987):

The first stage of the carrier project was to engage your students, or to do some diagnostic assessment on what they knew about the topic being studied [see Figure 1, below]. This stage could include showing students some artworks and talking about them, brainstorming ideas and thinking about the key topic. In the next stage the teacher would guide inquiry work, or exploration of ideas through creating artworks. From this stage the students would then choose a product to create – like a painting, a kite, a print, or a sculpture. The final stage was the teacher’s evaluation, or summative assessment, of the artwork created.

In addition to the Hubbard and Rouse influence, the USA’s inclusion of responding to artworks was also evident in the K-7 syllabus. While the syllabus included many carrier projects that had been trialled in classrooms and could be immediately implemented by the teacher, all of these projects were guided by three key objectives:

1. Specific art learning: learning about visual language, such as the elements and principles in both verbal and visual forms.
2. Making art: giving students opportunities to visually express their personal ideas and emotions.
3. General understanding: learning about social, cultural and historical contexts, the role of art in society, and using language to describe their artistic experiences.

Through these objectives was an integration of visual arts language and responding experiences. An Understanding Art appendix of the curriculum that included 45 pages exploring a range of issues, such as questions to engage artworks, ideas for gallery visits, as well as protocols for engaging Aboriginal art. These ideas were consistent with those of Discipline Based Art Education (DBAE) (Greer, 1987).

Lesson Four: Consider a Model

The implementation of the Arts and Crafts Syllabus K-7 was not complete in WA due to the closing of the Branch, and lack of personnel to ensure professional learning for existing primary teachers. The syllabus was then replaced with the WA Curriculum Framework between 1995 and 1998 (Curriculum Council WA, 1998). The change of curriculum saw the integration of the five arts subjects in WA, and less instructional time for visual arts in many primary schools. It also coincided with diminishing time in tertiary teacher education courses. The effect of the curriculum change and loss of Subject Superintendents and the primary arts specialist teachers in many schools had a negative effect on
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visual arts instruction. Even a decade later many primary teachers still often feel like they are not confident nor competent to facilitate meaningful visual arts learning, as reported both anecdotally and in the literature (Alter, Hayes, & O’Hara, 2009a; Lemon & Garvis, 2013; Morris & Lummis, 2014). The aim of the carrier project approach was to create a model that could provide flexible ways to take an initial drawing and motivational experience into a sequence of easily-identifiable practical activities for generalist teachers. This approach was designed to build teacher confidence in integrating visual arts experiences within the primary classroom.

As motivation theories suggest, if teachers do not feel confident or competent, they will likely disengage from an activity (Bandura, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2006). Engagement and motivation theories also suggest that success from completing concrete activities gives individual’s the self-efficacy to set harder goals and to work towards them, even when faced with challenges (Bandura, 2012; Deci & Moller, 2007; Martin, 2007). These theories provide an argument for utilising a concrete model in the primary school years, as a guide for primary school teachers to follow if they need or want it. The carrier project model is one that could be used to scaffold teachers’ planning and to support their integration of both art making and responding in the classroom. The carrier project approach is consistent with the secondary curriculum in that it encourages an inquiry process prior to a final product, and in this approach, promotes critical thinking about a topic rather than committing to the first idea for an artwork. Consequently, it also aligns with many of the arguments about the essentialness of visual arts in the 21st century (Alter et al., 2009b; Eisner, 2003; Zupančič et al., 2015). Lastly, notion of a final product links to the presentation aspect of the visual arts syllabus, which promotes the celebration of artworks in their own right. While not every teacher may want to use the carrier approach model, perhaps it is important to offer a range of models to teachers during pre-service teacher education as a guideline approach to authentic arts education (as opposed to one-off arts activities). As it was in the 1980s, perhaps increased engagement in primary visual arts activities will have a positive effect on secondary and tertiary enrolments in visual arts and courses where students can apply visual thinking skills.

Conclusion

This narrative inquiry research project has documented the collective story of 21 WA visual arts educators from the 1950s onwards. This paper has expressed some of the story from the 1950s to the release of the Arts and Crafts Syllabus K-7 in WA. We would like to acknowledge and thank the research participants who shared their lived experiences with us during interviews, and who also shared documents and read transcripts and vignettes as the story emerged. The fragments of this story have been shaped into lessons that contemporary visual arts educators can learn from the history of our subject. The first lesson was to promote visual arts as a viable career option. The second was to recognise the important skills that art making can teach students, namely to both conceptualise ideas in visual text and to manipulate materials. The third lesson was to promote positivity, as the example of gaining tertiary entrance status for the subject of visual arts in WA had such a large positive impact on the whole visual arts education community. Promoting accomplishments for visual arts within the public domain can lead to increased support, such as promotion and resourcing. The final lesson was to consider using pedagogical models to structure visual arts learning. This lesson was particularly important for the primary years, as often the generalist teacher is the facilitator of visual arts experiences. Models provide an insight into visual arts pedagogy and can be used to scaffold meaningful arts experiences. The four lessons may not always be clear, and some ideas may be contentious, but it is from reflecting on the past that visual arts education can move forward.

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