Building capacity and confidence through arts based learning experiences: A whole school approach

Author
Klopper, Christopher

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Chapter 4

Building Capacity and Confidence Through Arts-Based Learning Experiences: A Whole-School Approach

Christopher Klopper
Wow Tommy! I never knew clever kids could do art!

- Year 4 student from Beachside State School

Arts-based learning experiences produce positive learning outcomes, such as creating productive attitudes to learning, facilitating development of a greater sense of personal and cultural identity and fostering more creative and imaginative ways of thinking in young children (Bamford 2006; Eisner 2002; Robinson 2001). Internationally, there is a growing body of evidence that arts-based learning and engagement has a range of positive outcomes in terms of the lives of young people both in and out of school settings (Bamford 2006; Deasy 2002; Seidel, Tishman, Winner, Hetland and Palmer 2009). The Australian curriculum learning area of the arts equally recognizes the distinctiveness of dance, drama, media arts, music and visual arts, and further recognizes the connections between the art forms. It promotes the arts as fundamental to student learning and the expansion of capacity to 'perceive, create, think, feel, symbolize, communicate, understand, and become confident and creative individuals' (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA] 2010: 2). From Kindergarten to Year Eight, all art forms are taught through a balance of three organizing strands: generating, realizing and responding. Within these broad categories, each art form has its own specific terminology, concepts and processes. Students learn to use art form-specific concepts, skills and processes in their making and responding, while developing aesthetic knowledge through their arts learning (ACARA 2011).

The very nature of the learning area requires pupils to be exposed to dance, drama, music, media and visual art, which can be a rather daunting task for even the most experienced teacher. It is highly improbable to find an expert in all five art forms; however, what is more important is for teachers to become experts at facilitating teaching and learning activities in all art forms so that the students in their classroom are exposed to the arts and access channels of creativity and further study.

This chapter reports on a year-long project, the Arts 2 Excellence programme, which aimed to build the capacity and confidence of identified teachers and students through arts-based learning experiences. The project responded to the problem identified by classroom teachers at Beachside State School by offering quality arts-based learning experiences. The project was conceptualized as an applied form of participatory action research in a dynamic setting. The participatory action research methodology was employed to cyclically evaluate the question: 'How can a whole-school approach to arts-based learning experiences build capacity and confidence in students and staff?' Creswell (2012) explains that participatory
action research strives for 'open, broad-based involvement of participants by collaborating in decisions as consensual partners and engaging participants as equals to ensure their well-being' (583). Over time, the methods and modes of action are formed through a 'dialectic movement between action and reflection' (Kidd and Kral 2005: 187). Participatory action research is cyclical in nature, and the relationship between action and reflection can be understood as a self-reflective spiral that involves 'multiple cycles of reflecting, planning, acting and observing' (McTaggart 1997).

Gall, Gall and Borg (2007) emphasize the importance of continued reflective practice, as this process provides teachers (practitioners) with the ability to 'step back from the fast-paced and problematic world of practice to ponder and share ideas about the meaning, values, and impact of their practice' (604). Kidd and Kral (2005) believe that within a participatory action research study, the generation of knowledge is inextricably connected to one's action(s), and a successful participatory action research study is 'best measured by the changes in the lives of the participants' (189). The project was operationalized through a series of multi-pronged PIRI cycles (Plan, Implement, Review and Improve) that focused on:

- offering identified students visual arts extension activities on a weekly basis each school term
- providing ongoing professional development for all staff about 'finding the arts' in what they plan, prepare and deliver
- mentoring two identified teachers over the duration of one year to deepen their capacity and confidence of arts-based learning experiences to move from dependency to autonomy.

Drawing on a cultural anthropological framework to trial the project, areas of cultural impact, such as changes prompted at an organizational level, changes in external perceptions and changes in profile and influence, are extrapolated and showcased.

Cultural impact

The importance of arts-based learning experiences has gained increased recognition through active global advocacy; however it is also true that 'arts education is continually struggling to establish a secure status in formal curricula' (Iwai 2003: 13). The lobby encouraging arts-based learning activities and innovations within schools has attempted not only to promote the implementation of the arts in formal and non-formal settings, but also to improve the quality of education, appreciating the role of the arts and creativity in the school environment as a tool for promoting ethical values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours while deepening cultural wealth. The collection of beliefs, attitudes and behaviours of all persons in a school community profile that particular culture. The effect of school culture on school improvement initiatives and innovations is significant. Maehr and Midgley (1996) offered
the acknowledgement that a school can be understood as a discrete culture evolved from the field of organizational and corporate research. School culture refers to the interactions that occur behind the scenes of the school, such as friendships formed, conversations and informal roles that members of the school community take on. These behaviours arise from the values, norms and beliefs of the school. The school culture influences how members solve problems, work together and integrate new ideas into the classroom. Those within the school system often change their beliefs after being a part of the school for a period of time. Just as culture within a community is verified through the values, beliefs, rituals and behaviours of the people within it, school culture is made manifest through similarly shared social understandings, relationships and activities (Bruner 1996).

Kindler (1987) highlighted how education innovations are regularly grounded in common assumptions of their inherent value. Charland (2011: 2) furthered: ‘little consideration is given to overcoming the pre-existing structural, cultural and dispositional barriers to teacher professional development that may defeat program acceptance and persistence’. A shift in a culture’s shared social understandings, relationships and activities can, and often do, occur primarily in response to contextual change (Steward 1967). Contextual changes such as environmental, political or economic changes, or those originating from any other domain outside a culture group’s immediate control, require attention, adoption, adaptation and, frequently, new ways of thinking about previously held relationships. For example, the introduction of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN)¹ regime in Australian schools has altered many teachers’ conceptualizations of teaching and learning; their relationships with students, caregivers and administrators; and their interactions with each other. This emphasizes how a school’s culture is fluid and predisposed to change through dynamic responses to the various internal and external contextual variants.

Identifying the contextual variants requires a framework through which the demarcation of the accounts of knowledge and subsequent dissemination can be viewed. Drawing on the work of Bronfenbrenner (1979, 2005), which originally was intended to explain the relationship between environmental conditions and child development, an application for interpreting an eco-systemic culture of a school is offered. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) model of the cultural ecosystem (Figure 2) represents the interrelated connection and influence, from society at the macrosystem level, to the individual at the microsystem level.

The culture of a school is resultant of constant negotiation of variants from each level of the cultural ecosystem. Predominant ideas about the role, place and value of education in society operate at a macrosystem level; policy, curricula and professional standards at the exosystem level; learning expectations and outcomes together with teaching practices operate at the mesosystem level; and teachers’ personal understandings of identity and mission at the microsystem level. The dynamic interchange between students’, educators’, caregivers’ and administrators’ microsystem understandings and mesosystem relationships, functioning within the opportunities and constraints of the exosystem and macrosystem, characterize the distinctive culture of a school. The attendance to school improvement
initiatives and innovations requires not only traction from exosystem-level engagement, but also enactment by individuals – teachers – at the microsystem level. As Charland (2011) so aptly articulates:

[Each level of scale presents an important consideration in the adoption of a curricular or pedagogical intervention; the intervention should capture in some form macro-level values, fit within the systemic constructs of the exosystem, be compatible with basic curricular and pedagogical expectations that define the mesosystem, and ultimately allow for a sense of purpose, agency, efficacy, and idiosyncratic creation of meaning by individuals at the microsystem level.]

Employing Bronfenbrenner's (1979) cultural ecosystem model to trial the project required attention, not simply to the proposed ecosystemic levels, but also to the fluidity of the relationship(s) between and alongside the levels. Such attendance afforded the establishment an entry point and a delineation of the subsequent stages required to successfully implement and sustain the initiative.

The success of any educational initiative or innovation is dependent on collective consultation coupled with mutual respect among all stakeholders (Fullan 1990). Foisting educational initiatives that might challenge teachers' values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviours, without transparent and consultative dialogue at a microsystem level, has the potential to trivialize the initiatives and offer a shallow and often short-lived attendance. The corollary of introducing an initiative at the exosystem level can result in a 'tick-a-box' response by the stakeholders involved. Such responses do not bring about any cultural change to practice, but
rather manifest a culture of maintaining status quo. It is fair to claim that to bring about an effective cultural change when implementing educational initiatives or innovations, ongoing collective consultation between all stakeholders is required. Collective consultation values the maintenance and expansion of relationships with the intention that these new and renewed relationships would produce changes in individuals' beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviours at both a microsystem and macrosystem level as new expectations supersede old.

The Australian curriculum learning area of the arts promotes this discipline as fundamental to student learning and expansion of capacity to 'perceive, create, think, feel, symbolize, communicate, understand and become confident and creative individuals' (ACARA 2010: 2). It has been identified that arts education in primary schools both in Australia and overseas is unsatisfactory (Alter, Hays and O'Hara 2009; Anderson 2003; Klopper 2007; Wiggins and Wiggins 2008). Generally it is asserted that students receive limited exposure to formal arts education instruction and the quality of the instruction they do receive is poor due to teachers' lack of content knowledge. Wiggins and Wiggins (2008) argue that in order for there to be improvement, policy makers need to be provided with a clear understanding of what is occurring in primary classrooms pertaining to the teaching of the arts. There is a need for research that explores the contextual variants and associated efficacy of teachers' teaching of the arts within the primary classroom.

Case 7: There is not enough time to teach the arts

Beachside State School is no ordinary primary school. Unlike traditional schools, the primary school is situated metres from the beach and nestled between apartment housing. At Beachside State School, there is a strong affordance of creative experiences; in particular, music, movement and visual arts, because of their acknowledged role in enhancing children's intellectual, social and emotional development. In the Preparatory classroom, the arts are taught as part of an integrated programme with the aim that all learning experiences assist children to develop vital skills. Years One to Seven receive discrete music lessons, while the class teachers incorporate drama, dance and visual art in the classroom curriculum.

The principal and deputy head teacher of the school share a common vision: 'all children have the potential to succeed, it is just a matter of identifying the avenue and then providing opportunity for growth and excellence.' To promote this shared vision, it has been identified that the school and its respective staff are committed to providing a variety of extra-curricular activities and clubs, such as Soccer-X, Australian National Tae Kwon-Do, rugby league, Fitness Friday, Music Excellence Programme, guitar and keyboard lessons, choir, Hatchlings - Introduction to Drama and junior art lessons.

Collegial conversations between the deputy principal and teaching staff revealed that they believed they lacked the time and skill to teach the arts well. During focus group discussions, the teachers participating expressed feelings of being overwhelmed with the needs of all of the curriculum areas and said this resulted in a reduction in the time they devoted to arts
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education. Some teachers felt that the time devoted to the visual arts was also pressured by the tasks necessary to facilitate activities, such as provision of art materials, preparation and clean-up as well as locating resources. Additionally, the majority of teachers believed their teaching time was dominated by an attention to English and Mathematics because the demands of departmental directives necessitated that students achieve benchmark standards in literacy and numeracy.

The Beachside State School administration responded by offering ongoing professional development opportunities through a partnership with the local university to build teacher competence, confidence and the skills required to deliver an arts education without draining the time allocations to other learning areas. The Arts 2 Excellence programme was thus conceived.

The Arts 2 Excellence programme

A year-long Arts 2 Excellence learning experience programme for primary students and their teachers was designed to address the teachers’ raised concerns. The programme was envisioned to remove and/or lessen such concerns by building confidence around teachers’ own skills and abilities to be creative and artistic in their classroom practices and for students to use their innate and learned creativity to take risks, explore possibilities in their learning and develop life-wide problem-solving skills. The project centred around four key foci, namely professional development opportunities for the staff, delivering weekly visual arts extension classes for identified students, consultation with staff about ‘finding the arts’ in what they plan and deliver and mentoring two staff members towards a sustainable practice of professional development.

Professional development opportunities for the staff

Finding time in a school calendar and teachers’ diaries is never an easy task, especially when professional development opportunities are being offered outside the regular school programme or pupil-free development days. Nonetheless, three one-and-a-half-hour Friday afternoon dates were set and advertised to all staff as an opportunity to build capacity and confidence in arts-based learning. When 28 of the 31 teachers arrived for the first professional development session, the school administration was overwhelmed at the positive response and heartened that the staff really did want to commit to professional development in the arts.

The introductory session introduced staff to an overview of arts education and the possible approaches available for adoption or adaption for their classroom environment. Once a shared understanding of the capacity the arts has within the classroom was achieved, a brainstorming activity followed. Each discrete learning area was grouped together and
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tasked with 'dreaming possibilities' of arts-based learning support resources that could be realized in and around the school. This activity generated much enthusiasm and energetic cohesiveness, and potential resources beyond the classroom were conceived. These included:

- an Indigenous garden full of native edible fruits and plants
- a dinosaur park located in one of the courtyards in the school
- stairwell mathematics – measurements demarcated on the stairwell to be used as an oversized measuring tape
- a self-directed interactive science tour through the school
- healthy eating murals around the tuck shop area
- an amphitheatre
- musical chairs – interactive audible musical murals that narrate and share facts and figures
- a world map on a corridor wall
- height charts
- alphabet charts
- literature quotes
- interactive rubric-cube-type teaching aids.

Following this rather academic activity, the staff were guided through a series of foundational drawing techniques. Initially, many were reluctant to start and to share their attempt. In the literature surrounding arts education, one of the recurring issues highlighted is teachers' lack of confidence in their ability to teach the arts (Hudson and Hudson 2007). However, as the wandering eyes across the tables noticed attempts similar to their own, it was as if a key had been turned. Immediately, the noise level rose as the staff realized their own artistic capacity and saw that their angst was shared. Now the non-verbal body language transformed into verbal communication of affirmation and confirmation: 'Look at this, not bad for a Friday afternoon and computer teacher! What about Fitzy, he's the muso but can he draw?' To which Fitzy held up his sketching and showed all. Fitzy was able to confirm that exceeding in one area does not prevent someone from exceeding in other areas. The teachers' conversations turned quickly to how easy it is to compartmentalize their own and students' abilities. Often this compartmentalization is convenient, used to self-limit involvement with activities that are perceived not to come easily.

During the afternoon, it was noticed that an adult was with a group of children painting a mural on the exterior of one of the classrooms. I asked the principal if this was a parent or community volunteer, to which the answer was 'No, that is Amanda.' Amanda works as a teacher aide at Beachside State School with both her mother and sister. She has remained in this profession for 15 years and demonstrates her passion and artistic ability through the offering of art classes for students outside of school hours. I felt really bad that Amanda was not afforded access to the professional development sessions and decided that a plan needed
to be devised. It was the motivation that came from witnessing this exclusion that resulted in the Arts 2 Excellence programme mentoring two staff members towards a sustainable practice of professional development. Amanda and Charlie (a full-time teacher) were approached by the administration and requested to assist the Arts 2 Excellence programme's weekly arts extension classes for identified students. Amanda was delighted to be offered this opportunity and could not wait to start with the programme.

By the end of the afternoon session, all staff sketches were displayed on the wall in the activity room. The staff decided that a calendar should be produced using their artistic offerings. The idea was encouraged and furthered by offering more sessions.

Visual arts extension classes for identified students

The visual arts extension classes were held weekly for students identified by classroom teachers as having exceptional interest and skill in the visual arts.

We want to make sure that all students feel that they can succeed, and if that means drawing a picture, then so be it. Not everyone can be good at Math and English. Because many of our teachers don't know how to provide extension activities for these visually artistic, gifted and talented students we need you [the university] to assist us all.

(interview with deputy principal)

The programme was designed to implement group classes for Year Prep–3 students and Year 4–7 students on alternate weeks. Amanda would support the Year Prep–3 students while Charlie would support the Year 4–7 students.

The group of 23 students excitedly arrived outside the all-purpose activity room. Amanda was employing her best behavioural management techniques, but the sheer novelty of something new was no match. Students entered the classroom and hurriedly secured a chair. These were height adjustable, swivel enabled and on wheels and therefore not conducive to a productive visual arts session with young children. Amanda demonstrably confronted each student who dared to swivel, but a losing battle played out. I noticed that the tables were

Table 1: Week 1: Year Prep–Year Three

| Theme: Musical Drawings | Warming-up exercises – draw their name in the air with different parts of the body to different-paced music – fast-slow |
| | Draw lines, different media and different musical stimuli and move from drawing to drawing as the music starts and stops |
| | Choose a small ‘section’ of line drawings to work on further |
| | Each student to give one example of a good thing/experience of the session |
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Table 2: Week 2: Year Four-Year Seven

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme: Musical Drawings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Warming-up exercises – respond to music with different body movements - imagine using invisible brush on end of arm (or pretend to be an elephant with brush in trunk) to 'paint' strokes in air</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work on paper – make lines/strokes in response to music and the feelings evoked by the music</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choose one work or section of one image to continue to work/reflect on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Each student to give one example of a good thing/experience of the session</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

height adjustable too, so with some strategic convincing of the students, tables were adjusted and chairs were pushed alongside the wall. Now we were ready.

Making visual art builds children’s self-esteem by providing opportunities to express what they are thinking and feeling (Harland et al. 2000). The small-group art activities help children practise important social skills such as taking turns, sharing and negotiating for materials.

While making art, young children develop control of large- and small-muscle groups. The large arm movements required for painting or drawing at an easel or on large paper on the floor build coordination and strength. The smaller movements of fingers, hands and wrists required for cutting with scissors, using model clay and drawing or painting on smaller surfaces develop fine motor dexterity and control. With repeated opportunities for practice, young children gain confidence in their use of tools for making art and later for writing (Weissman and Hendrick 2013).

As the children’s art-making skills developed, their activities moved beyond exploring just with their senses and began to involve the use of symbols. The children began to represent real objects, events and feelings in their artwork. Drawing, in particular, became an activity that presented the children with the prospect of symbolizing what they know and feel. It is a necessary outlet for children whose vocabulary, written or verbal, may be limited. The use

Table 3: Week 3: Year Prep-Year Three

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme: Fun with Shapes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Make shapes with body and change with the music – round, square, triangle etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play with shapes – ball, blocks, boxes, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Print, draw, paint shapes – templates available if needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use materials provided (paper, material, textures, squares, circles, rectangles) to create collage of city, house, park, backyard, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Each student to give one example of a good thing/experience of the session</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
of symbols in artwork is very important because it provides a foundation for children's use of words to symbolize objects and actions in formal writing (Siegesmung 1998).

**Teacher focus group and follow-up**

A teacher focus group was held after the first four weeks of the programme. Teachers spoke of most children in their class wanting to attend the extension visual arts classes. However, with limited time and space, the project could not just keep accepting more and more children. This was an impetus for classroom teachers to implement for themselves the activities that were on offer in the extension classes. This provided Amanda and Charlie the break that they had been hoping for. Their attendance in the sessions was legitimized and clarified, as their role was now crucial for all teachers to gain insight and expertise. The speed at which this transfer of skill and knowledge occurred was truly amazing to witness. The visual arts extension classes occurred 45 minutes on either side of lunch break. The first session focused on skill development and briefing of the task that would be expected after lunch. During the lunch break, Amanda would share the skills and task covered with class teachers, and then they would head back to their rooms and attempt to implement the activity. It appeared that resource acquisition was achievable and visual art was now a part of the class curriculum, at least on a Tuesday. Encouraged by their perception of the children's response to the arts-based learning experiences, the teachers' readiness to transfer pedagogical approaches from restricted visual arts activities to visual stimuli in other learning areas marked a significant shift from limited application to wider learning.

Table 5: Week 5: Year Prep-Year Three

| Theme: My Favourite Colour | Warming-up exercises – respond to music – 'What colour do you feel/see?' | My book of colours – warm and cool – colour friends/colour opposites | My favourite colour ... it makes me feel ... | Each student to give one example of a good thing/experience of the session |
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Table 6: Week 6: Year Four–Year Seven

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme: How Colours Make My World Look</th>
<th>Body movement to music/songs with colour theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Warm and cool colours – choose your favourite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Colour mixing with black and white – make form and shape/light and dark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Each student to give one example of a good thing/experience of the session</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

experiences for all. With this knowledge, the second professional development session was planned and delivered. Accompanying handouts were provided for all the activities completed to date to reinforce the practical nature of the sessions, but not to take away the invaluable conduit Amanda and Charlie had become between the extension classes and the mainstream classrooms. This reinforced the need for continued productive mentoring possibilities.

As the children decided how to make parts fit together into a whole, where to place objects and what details to include, they learned to coordinate what they experienced with the movements of their hands and fingers. This eye-hand coordination reinforced essential classroom skills required for many activities, including forming letters and spacing words in formal writing.

The children found that making visual art was a sensory exploration activity. We asked them to describe the feeling of a crayon moving across paper and seeing a blob of coloured paint grow larger. Exploring a variety of materials is very important because it is through exploration that children build knowledge of the objects in the world around them. Activities centring on making visual art also required children to make decisions and conduct self-evaluations. Week 8 exemplifies the process:

- **first**, they decide what they will portray in their art, e.g. a person, a tree, a dragon
- **second**, they choose the media they will use, the arrangement of objects in their work and the perspective viewers will take
- children decide **how quickly or how slowly** they will finish their project and, finally, **how they will evaluate their creation**.

Table 7: Week 7: Year Prep–Year Seven

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme: Self-portrait</th>
<th>Warm-up to music – body movement/shapes to variety of music styles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3D – forms, shape and textures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Construction – clay, card, objects, paint</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Each student to give one example of a good thing/experience of the session</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Arts 2 Excellence programme facilitated young children to experience a sense of emotional satisfaction when they were involved in making art, whether they were modelling with clay, drawing with crayons or making a collage from recycled scraps. Deciding what they were to make and what materials they were to use may have been the first opportunity some children had to make independent choices and decisions.

During a review of the progress and impact of the Arts 2 Excellence programme, the project leaders identified the opportunity to establish an artist-in-residence programme in order to:

- expose more students of Beachside State School to a visual artist in practice
- offer deeper learning experiences
- afford a group of students the opportunity to leave their legacy in the form of artwork
- provide an opportunity to draw media attention to a whole-school approach to arts-building capacities
- offer further professional development for the staff of Beachside State School to illuminate how to work with an artist from the community to reinforce their artistic ability.

After consultation with the administration of Beachside State School, it was decided to offer the seven students the opportunity to actively participate in the artist-in-residence programme. This afforded 70 students access to this learning experience over four days. Each session ran for two hours, with groups of ten engaging in the artistic processes offered by the artist-in-residence. A staff-specific session was offered so they too could make their indelible contribution to the school surround. As the artist-in-residence programme had not been part of the approved project, further funds were needed to support this initiative; these were raised through the school administration and the Parent and Community Association. Parents and care-givers had witnessed the positive effects of the children's participation in the project, and supporting such initiatives was now deemed necessary by all involved with Beachside State School.

Mosaics were chosen as a medium that would offer all children the opportunity to demonstrate their imagination and creativity in their own artwork, but would contribute to a larger work with relative ease. Drawing on the location of Beachside State School, an
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underwater theme was chosen for the mosaic mural that would be a permanent installation stemming from the artist-in-residence programme. The Year Seven classes were divided into groups of ten, and, each day, two groups would spend half the day working together with the artist. A range of mesh sheet templates was available for the students to use as a starting point. The all-purpose room was littered with jars and tubs of mosaic tiles interspersed with squeeze bottles of adhesive. The children got working with limited guidance or encouragement, and the sound of industrious children reverberated from the room.

Tommy stands out among his peers and is known for his academic prowess and is equally identified for his non-athletic build and ability. Tommy ensured he remained a safe distance from conversations, sitting quietly to one side to carefully plot each mosaic. He struggled significantly with not being able to produce a work of art that he could deem perfect. The artist-in-residence recognized Tommy's internal struggle and spent time conversing with him and showing pictures of artworks she had produced or was in the process of producing. Tommy withdrew even more, and no further conversation was held. When closing the session, children carefully placed their mosaics outside to dry and Tommy pensively placed his alongside the other drying artworks. Before placing it down, he stood observing the other artworks and remained even when the lunch bell chimed. Upon approach, Tommy turned and said:

‘My whale actually looks like a whale. Some of the other mosaics don’t really look like sea creatures, but mine does. I’ve never been able to draw, I’m not real good at sport, but everyone knows I know Math and Science. But look at my whale! It really looks like a whale.’

After the children had been dismissed, Tommy appeared with an adult, soon identified as his father. Tommy excitedly said: ‘I need to show my dad my whale. He doesn’t believe me that I made a whale today.’ Upon locating his mosaic, his dad’s response summed it all: ‘Wow Tommy! I never knew clever kids could do art!’ Tommy had broken the mould. For an extended period in his primary school career, Tommy had been labelled as the clever kid and was only expected to achieve academically. Today, Tommy had demonstrated not only to us all, but most importantly to himself, that you never know what you are capable of unless you have an attempt.

Rich arts-based learning experiences for all

The success of any educational initiative or innovation is dependent on collective consultation combined with mutual respect among all stakeholders. There is no expectation of a macrosystem-level change to the Australian curriculum and in particular the arts learning area in the foreseeable future. However, there remain numerous opportunities for school cultures to change through carefully planned interventions involving the exosystem, mesosystem and microsystem levels of the school cultural ecosystem. Even though Beachside State School claimed that they privilege young children to experience a sense of emotional satisfaction when they are involved in making art, they did not necessarily indicate that all staff
adhere to these learning and teaching ideals. Due to the several contextual variants at play in a school cultural ecosystem, varying degrees of commitment to the goals and consequential practices manifest in multiple forms. If an intervention focuses solely on exosystem-level change — that is, whole-school change — there is the tendency that classroom practice will reflect short-term accommodations rather than lasting cultural adjustment. For effective cultural assimilation to occur, the collective consultation at the mesosystemic level — which involves all stakeholders in the ecosystem — needs to be purposefully nurtured, supported and sustained to generate change in teachers’ individual understandings and response.

Charland (2011) succinctly asserts: ‘Meaningful cultural change is instantiated at the microsystem level, evidenced in the espoused values and beliefs of the individual’ (13). The project was designed initially as an extension project, but realized significant change in practice at a classroom level. Individual teachers responded exclusively to the influence of the intervention introduced in the mesosystem level. These responses could be identified as changes in beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviours of teachers enacting a cultural change in varying degree. Variability is to be expected in any social group, as ‘not all of any culture is internalized in anybody’ (D’Andrade 1992: 41). While it is evident that the culture at Beachside State School has changed, the influence of cultural knowledge on individual behaviour is not foretelling, but interacts with other contextual variants such as individual characteristics, affective ups and downs and recurrent re-evaluation of motivations and rewards.

The Arts 2 Excellence project described in this chapter is an example of second-order educational change. It aimed to influence essential arrangements and opportunities in learning and teaching through offering arts-based learning experience. Cuban (1990) makes the distinction between first-order and second-order change in schools. First-order changes influence staff, resources, curriculum content and approach to learning and teaching, ‘without substantially altering the ways in which adults and children perform their roles’ (73). Charland (2011: 3) describes first-order change as ‘a new wardrobe, giving the appearance of a new identity, but easily cast off in favour of the next fashion trend’.

Second-order changes, on the other hand, influence the business-as-usual model by introducing new goals and new ways of doing things. Second-order changes reconfigure roles and responsibilities of teachers and students and include pedagogical transformations. Second-order change has the potential to significantly impact the cultural core of a school by challenging the understandings of its staff. However, it also faces ‘the quiet but persistent resistance of teachers and administrators’ (Cuban 1990: 75) who may not immediately see worth in forsaking deeply held and culturally reinforced traditions.

Identified areas of cultural impact at Beachside State School include a financial commitment by the administration to continue funding the arts extension programme that affords both students and staff the opportunity to develop and extend artistic skills. The school now offers a designated arts enrichment programme with prospects of advancing music, dance, drama and visual arts. The enrichment programme has become a positive
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contributor to the school marketing, especially when parents or caregivers present with a child who has not had the chance to shine in previous school environments. As a result of the teacher professional development and student extension programs in visual arts, dance and music, Beachside State School now offers rich arts-based learning experiences for all.

The Beachside State School Arts 2 Excellence programme provides important opportunities to develop young people’s practical, exploratory, expressive, design and problem-solving skills at a level appropriate to their age, maturity and physical dexterity. It allows children to express their ideas, feelings and interpretations of the world through picture, sound, drama and dance.

Note

1 In 2008, the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) commenced in Australian schools. Every year, all students in Years Three, Five, Seven and Nine are assessed on the same days using national tests in Reading, Writing and Language Conventions (Spelling, Grammar and Punctuation) and Numeracy [see http://www.naplan.edu.au].

References


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