

## Ephemeral art with young children in Aotearoa NZ

The Napier Kindergarten Association (NKA) provides early childhood education to children aged 2- 5 years in state funded kindergartens which operate between the hours of 8-3pm, five days per week and only employs fully trained and registered Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers. Our kindergartens follow the New Zealand early childhood curriculum Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 1996).

In this paper we define ephemeral art as an artistic creation that is transitory and exists only briefly. Collins (1994) offers some synonyms for *Ephemeral* which includes; *brief, evanescent, flash, fleeting, fugacious, impermanent, passing, short-lived, temporary, transient and momentary*. Ephemeral art is often made from a range of objects found in nature. Ephemeral art has been inspired by internationally renowned artists such as Richard Schilling and Andy Goldsworthy (Goldsworthy, 2004).

This research explores the benefits to children of engaging in this unstructured form of art which brings the artist in a direct conversation with *Papatuanuku* – the Māori concept for the Earth Mother (Reed, 2008), working with materials made by nature. Our paper captures empirical research undertaken in eight NKA kindergartens that have implemented activities in relation to Ephemeral Art. The researchers are two Education Managers employed by the Napier Kindergarten Association. The research is qualitative in nature, using material from empirical findings. It illustrates aspects of children's cognitive and cultural learning in relation to exploration of maths concepts, their development of language and the enhancement of understandings of science. Further it demonstrates children's identity as creative thinkers. The researchers have undertaken a sound ethical process including gaining informed consent from all involved; children and their families and teachers. The process included gathering a large sample of digital images of ephemeral art exemplars and discussions between the teachers and researchers.

Many cultures have some form of ephemeral art embedded in their cultural practices (Lichtenwalner, 2008). Our research study has looked at how children of Aotearoa, New Zealand are provoked by the natural and manufactured world that surrounds them in their expressions of ephemeral art.

Jalongo and Stamp (pg, 2. 1997) describe the word *aesthetic* as coming from the Greek word *aisthetikos* – meaning perceiving with the senses. We noticed that teachers who facilitate ephemeral art create a banquet for the senses and give children the freedom to touch, get dirty and messy, smell, listen, observe and think. This type of engagement allows the child to develop through the principle of Kotahitanga/Holistic development (Ministry of Education, 1996). It is our observation that young children are naturally drawn to being ephemeral artists. It may be that the adults around them empower and facilitate these urges through co-construction or conversely deter their interest (Edwards, Gandini & Forman , 1998).

We observed that teachers who successfully encourage this art form have translated the links between the natural world of Aotearoa and the kindergarten settings. They invite exploration with materials from beaches, deciduous autumn trees, rocks from river beds, flowers that would be found in urban gardens as well as flowers from native plants, pine cones, driftwood and sticks. They

are empowering their children to form an identity as a New Zealander who belongs to a place of unique cultures and landscapes.

Making time and space for wonderment and pondering in nature is one of the ways the teacher empowers our young artists. Similar experiences occur in the Forest Schools of Britain where children use natural 'found' materials to express their natural creativity in many different ways (Knight, 2009). Our collection of digital images and learning stories demonstrates some of the ways that the teacher presents natural and manufactured materials in an open ended and appealing way. Teachers have embraced an aesthetic presentation style for these materials. Inspired teachers, see beauty, symmetry, pattern and evolution in the world around them. Therefore, they scaffold the young children they work with to also see such richness. They have validated an open ended outcome i.e. no permanent or fixed artwork needs to result in the experimentation. The transitory art works are celebrated and the child is affirmed for their effort. Photography is the tool favoured for capturing ephemeral art. Some teachers empower the children by allowing them to photograph their own transitory creations, using a name card to identify the artist. Display areas can also be created to cherish such artistic offerings for a day or two.

Through analysis of the exemplars we theorised that the ephemeral art creations could be grouped into four categories:

- Mark Making
- Representational arranging
- Collating and arranging
- Construction and assembling

Many of the Kindergartens in this project are also engaged with the Enviroschools programme (Enviroschools Foundation, 2011) which aims to teach our children about creating a sustainable future. Our teachers believe that if you want the next generation to save the world you first have to teach them to love their world. Teachers have found that Ephemeral Art is a wonderful tool to impart science and sustainability education.

A somewhat unexpected outcome of this research is a growing awareness of how ephemeral art experiences are often rich in imaginary play. We had many examples of children giving meaning to representational materials in their fantasy play. There were also examples of the ephemeral art play being collaboration between several children that went on for a long period of time, growing in complexity over time.

Another feature of our analysis was debating the boundaries of where ephemeral art began and ended. We viewed many examples that could be considered 'borderline' ephemeral art. Some examples of this were creations with paper folding, clay sculptures, flax weaving and natural material installations such as the driftwood Christmas tree and wearable arts style hats. We concluded that, like many art forms the boundaries of one genre often blur with another. It does not seem important or necessary to demark one form from another if the creative outcomes for children are positive.

Children who have experienced the delicate wave patterns in sand dunes may echo this in their sand drawings. The child who has held a fern frond can imitate the ancient spiral pattern. A child left to play with rocks and shells at the beach will soon be patterning and sequencing them. Children taught to understand the Maori art designs in carvings and buildings will be able to express and understand such designs as part of their bicultural heritage. A Māori world view values the unique

gifts of Papatuanuku, Earth Mother, Atua Tangaroa God of the Sea and Atua Tanemahuta, God of the Forest (Reed, 2008).

## **Conclusion**

The process of being involved with this research has heightened teachers' awareness and interest in ephemeral art. To some extent it has elevated its status as an art form that does not have a tangible lasting product. Teachers' observations and interactions have become more skilful through this work. Teachers have valued the opportunities to share ideas of how other teachers offer materials that promote ephemeral art and subsequently enriched their own teaching repertoire. A further area for research could be how children are encouraged to create ephemeral art outside of the kindergarten setting e.g. on excursions to wooded areas and parks.

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**Eileen Kennedy and Beth Huddleston**

**Napier Kindergarten Association**

