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Excellence in Arts Based Education – One School’s Story

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Abstract

This article reports on the implementation and outcomes of a visual art pilot program undertaken at Connell State School in creative partnership with a research team from Griffith University’s School of Education and Professional Studies. Employing a framework of the four lenses developed by Seidel et al. (2009) – (learning, pedagogy, community dynamics and environment), this article investigates the notion of excellence as understood by decision makers associated with the pilot program’s design and implementation.

The overarching implications arising from this project transcend the nature and ability of ‘art making’ in and of itself to ‘produce’ excellence in the young. Instead it sends a strong message to the decision makers involved in future creative partnership projects to ensure a clear alignment of understanding between the program’s purposes and understood visions of excellence that drive programmatic decisions and ultimately the success of the partnership and program.

Introduction

The program discussed here was based on a decision of a school leadership team to extend their existing program of excellence to include the visual arts, such as painting, drawing and sculpture. Several factors contributed to their decision: a noted number of students had demonstrated natural artistic abilities creating art works that adorned the inside walls of classrooms and the outside walls of selected buildings in the school environment; a teacher aide had taken an interest in nurturing and leading successful student art making activities in a number of ad hock contexts; and other arts based activities such as music and dance were already included in the Excellence program on offer to students, in an extra-curricular format. In the past two decades many articles have been written and views expressed on the place, role and benefits of the arts in the educational life of young students (Campbell & Townshend, 1997; Fiske, 1999; Marshall, 2005; Robinson, 1999; Upitis, 2011). The core message of these articles and expressed views suggests an agreement that for young people, engagement in the arts enhanced their social, emotional and academic outcomes, and for enlightened governments that enabled such engagement through formal education it represented a necessary and worthwhile ‘investment in human capital’ (Gibson & Asthana, 1998) for and by the countries involved (NACCCE, 1999; ACER, 2004; Bamford & Wimmer, 2006; Bamford, 2010; NaeA, 2009; Eurydice, 2009). The strong emphasis placed on “the vital need to develop the creative abilities of all young people” (NACCCE, 1999, p. 2) by Governments in both developed and developing countries, point to the importance and inclusion of the arts as a priority in their educational policies. The importance of such policies is reflected in the Australian Curriculum which mandates classroom hours and integration of the arts across the school curriculum¹.

While policy makers appear to agree on the many benefits of educational engagement of young people in the arts, there are also questions and arguments raised by a number of authors who express strong concerns related to the misalignment between international and national educational policies and classroom practice. “While this [arts inclusion] may exist in policy,

¹ The Australian Curriculum was released in final version in 2014.

there is anxiety that practices may fall short of this aspiration. There are ongoing concerns - arguably mainly from the Arts education sector - that the Arts still play a rather peripheral role in school” (Bamford & Wimmer, 2012, p. 5). A number of causal issues are suggested as central to this marginalization of the Arts in mainstream education. These include a lack of: suitable resources, funding, equipment, time (given a crowded curriculum and intense focus on core subjects, i.e., literacy and numeracy), and a fundamental lack of appropriate training for teachers or lack of creative ‘in-school’ partnerships with arts specialists (Alter, Hays, & O’Hara, 2009; Bamford, 2008; Hall & Thomson, 2007; Thomson, 2007).

Questions raised in the implementation of this program reflect a number of the concerns expressed by this article seeks to contribute to the conversation regarding models of excellence, (in nature, concept and practice), creative partnerships and the complexities of the expectations of decision makers in arts based education. The primary school at the center of this article had no formal, curriculum based integrated ‘in-school’ arts program prior to the introduction of this visual art pilot program. Extra-curriculum activities in dance and music were promoted as Excellence programs and delivered by specialist providers working with a small number of students outside of normal school time.

To design and implement this program a creative partnership was established between the school leadership team and a University team, which included: an experienced researcher in arts and education; and the lead author (a visual artist / arts trained educator and student researcher) who was responsible for implementation of the project. The lead author was assisted in the weekly art activities by a teacher aide assigned by the school leadership and supported at times by a number of volunteer pre-service Diploma of Primary Education students, two volunteer parents and a community artist who worked with the students on the artist-in-residence program.

The Arts to Excellence Program Overview

The central programmatic focus on the pursuit of excellence in and through visual art making gave weight to the umbrella title, the Arts to Excellence (A2E) program, under which the various visual art based activities were designed and delivered. Thus, the program in this article will hereafter be referred to as the A2E program.

The characteristics or ‘elements of excellence’ in arts based education are not always easily recognised, however several researchers point to a strong connection between excellence and models of quality. Seidel et al. (2009) suggest that “identifying the signs of quality can be challenging, especially in an enterprise as complex and context-specific as teaching and learning” (p. 5). Bamford (2008) supports this notion of quality as an essential factor in the pursuit of excellence and notes that the achievement of quality must be planned, not just left

to occur “randomly”. Alter, Hays, and O’Hara (2009), agree that “forming models of quality arts education in the early years of primary school can ... be a highly problematic task” (p. 22).

While acknowledging the complexities of the political, cultural, philosophical and economic contexts related to education, authors (including Bamford (2010), Uptis (2011), and reports such as *UNICEF: Defining Quality in Education* (2000)), view quality as the key to successful arts based programs and Bamford (2010) contends that “there are certain sets of attributes that are generally associated with quality arts engagement and arts partnerships within education and these can become ‘prerequisites’ for a programme” (p. 47).

To achieve the successful implementation of quality arts based programs in schools, Bamford and Wimmer (2006) point to the need to include three main factors: the child, the teachers - teaching and learning environment and the community. Seidel et al. (2009) stipulate that with respect to whenever and wherever the arts are delivered, they must deliver a ‘quality experience’ or face the risk of further diminution into the realms of ‘busy work’. These two views formed the benchmark for the initial design of the A2E program (2011–2013). In essence, the identified goals to be achieved through the implementation of the A2E program rested on the successful delivery of a number of quality visual arts based programs designed to develop ‘capacity and confidence’ in the individual leading to excellence in ‘habits of mind’ (Seidel et al., 2009) in three key areas of visual arts based education (see Figure 1 below).

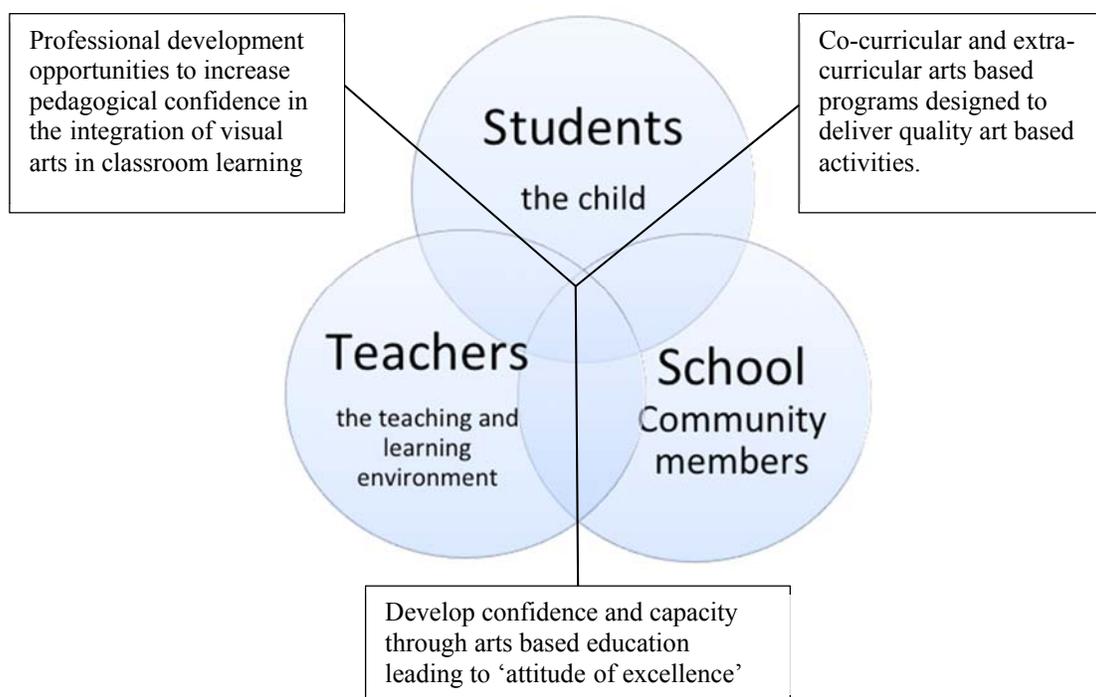


Figure 1. Overview of the three key interlocking areas of the Arts to Excellence Program

Based on the benchmark structure (developed from: Bamford and Wimmer, 2006; Seidel et al., 2009) three individual yet interlocking programs, were designed to be implemented during the life of the A2E project:

Firstly, the child or student focused program was designed to enhance the students' existing artistic skills and develop an attitude of excellence while supporting the School's ethos and aims of 'enhancing the personalization of learning' and 'assisting all students to fulfill their potential' (School Report, 2012). Students were engaged in both co-curricular 'in-school' and extra-curricular 'out-of-school' delivery models. The co-curricular A2E program (delivered once weekly during school time) was designed to artistically engage a small number of identified 'gifted and talented' students.

Secondly, the teacher or teaching and learning focused program was designed to offer professional development, consultation with an art specialist, mentoring and peer coaching for teaching staff. Such an approach is said by Bamford (2008) to engender an artistic and creative pedagogical 'confidence' in the integration of the visual arts in classroom learning. Some of these peer coaching and mentoring opportunities were built into the student program activities and some were to be delivered at the discretion of the school leadership team.

Thirdly, the community focused program was designed to offer opportunities for members of the school to develop a sense of confidence and capacity through participation and contribution as 'co-constructors' of ideas and expertise used in the design and installation of 'visual learning' art works across the cultural and physical landscape of the school community.

Methodology

In amplifying the Bamford and Winner (2006) structure, Seidel et al. (2009) suggest that what counts as quality in arts based education can change across independent settings as well as over time in the same setting. According to these authors the specific elements that denote quality depend to a great extent on the purposes and values of the program and its community. To accommodate the purposes, aims and objectives of the A2E program, which were multi-dimensional and multi-directional within a school community, a framework of four lenses, described by Seidel et al. (2009) was employed. The four lenses: learning, pedagogy, community dynamics, and environment, which detail a number of elements, characteristics and attributes that form 'models of quality' (and a view of excellence), were used as reference points in the planning and implementation of this project and then employed to frame and analyse the data.

Each lens, according to Seidel et al. (2009) “provides a way to help us focus on a number of particular, observable elements that indicate quality arts learning experiences” (p. 29). The lens of learning relates to a number of positive attributes or observable elements, including: engagement; purposeful experiences in creating artworks experimentation, exploration and inquiry; and ownership and personal investment. The lens of pedagogy includes elements related to how teachers conceive of and practice their craft, such as: authenticity and relevance in how they design and implement instruction; modeling artistic process, inquiry, and habits; participation in the learning experience; and intentionality, flexibility and transparency. The lens of community dynamics encompasses elements related to the social relationship in the school community, such as: respect and trust among all participants; a belief in capacities; and open communication and collaboration. The environment lens comprises elements related to the physical and cultural aspects: the functional and aesthetic space available; physical resources and materials; the centrality of the arts in the physical environment of the school; and sufficient time given to students (in block hours as well as years) to engage in authentic artistic work.

The Lens of Learning

Through the lens of learning, the A2E program was designed to employ both co-curricular and extra-curricular programmatic approaches to engage 10% of the student cohort in meaningful, experiential and purposeful art making endeavours.

The A2E program which commenced early in Term 4 – 2011 was initially offered to two small groups of students for 90 minute sessions on alternate weeks during the school term. Group 1 included six students from Prep to Year 3 and Group 2 consisted of eight students from Years 4 to 7. These students had been referred by their respective teachers as being ‘gifted and talented’ in art making, that is, in either painting or drawing.

Four key objectives were identified for the A2E program ‘in-school’ sessions:

- to engage and deepen the learning experiences for selected students around art making, art history and aesthetics in order to encourage greater confidence and strengthen personal capacity;
- provide purposeful objectives and appropriate instruction to students in order to increase their skills in making art in 2D and 3D formats and stimulate the development of excellence as both a mind-set and technical endeavor;
- offer appropriate themes and topics for artistic exploration and investigation through integration of skills and knowledge linked to personal values and meaning making;
- and

- stimulate and encourage authentic ownership and communication of personal views and concepts through critical thinking, intrinsic motivation and artistic image making.

Student Eligibility and Selection

Participation in the art excellence sessions was voluntary, for both students and teachers. The students were identified initially by their teachers on the strength of their perceived artistic ability; letters were sent home to parents to inform them of the A2E program and opportunity for their child to attend; and selected students were then offered an introductory art making and information session on the style and scope of the program. Students were then given the opportunity to accept or decline the offer of a place in the program.

The eligibility criteria drawn up by the school leadership team required only that the referred student be perceived by their teacher to be ‘gifted or talented in art’. Each teacher was free to nominate one or two students on these grounds. The definition of ‘gifted or talented’ was left to the teachers’ own understanding and no further specific selection criteria was provided. The school leadership team considered that approximately 2% of the school’s student cohort would fall into their commonly understood ‘gifted and talented’ or ‘excellence’ category and from this cohort would be drawn a small group of approximately 15 students deemed the most suited ‘gifted and talented’ in the visual arts.

It is noted that the set eligibility criteria and voluntary, self- and teacher-selected nature of participation limit the generalisability of this study.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected primarily through observations and field notes by the lead author. Semi-formal interviews, spontaneous unsolicited comments, reflections and informal conversations with the teacher aide, school staff, parents and volunteers, together with formal interviews with members of the school leadership team were also conducted by the lead author. Documentation of the art works generated during the life of the program was collected via digital stills and video recordings.

Inductive analyses have been employed through the utility of applied thematic analysis, which primarily have a descriptive and exploratory orientation. This methodology is well suited to large data sets (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2011) and is proven to be most suitable for team research. Because most of the data collected are in the form of free-flowing text (i.e. narrative), the analytical focus narrowed in on the divide between the analysis of words and the analysis using themes and codes. The interpretation is well supported by the data with the inclusion of non-theme-based and quantitative techniques adding analytic breadth to the study.

From a procedural standpoint a quantitatively-oriented word-based analyses has been engaged to evaluate the frequency and co-occurrence of particular words or phrases in the body of the textual data in order to identify key words, repeated ideas, or configuration of words with respect to other words in the text associated with the domain. Word-based techniques are valued for their efficiency and reliability since the original, “raw” data are used, resulting in minimal interpretation involved in the word counts, generally resulting in greater reliability. The word-based analyses have associated attributes of key words, surrounding words and phrases (Dey, 1993). The key-word-in-context (KWIC) method followed to identify all occurrences of the key words in the text and identified the context in which each word appeared.

Key Themes

Although it was initially conjectured that only a small number of students would be nominated from across the student body, the response in fact was much greater than expected. Ultimately up to forty-two student nominations were received from teachers, parents and students who self-referred. Regular requests for more placements continued to arrive during the first year of the program. During a review of progress the leadership and research teams recognised the high demand for a visual art program as a positive response and recognised also the difficulties and threats associated with attempting to accommodate large numbers of students in a program specifically designed on the basis of a low student/instructor ratio. This review also identified the opportunity to establish an artist-in-residence program to off-set the overwhelming response and allow the school leadership team to extend the scope of the arts based activities to engage a great number of students in a meaningful way. It was noted by the lead author that in the final selection process the teacher aide recommended against some of the students named on the list due to the students’ adverse behavioural issues.

In relation to students participating in the A2E program two clear themes emerged from the data collected with respect to increased confidence and capacity. In the context of the ‘in-school’ art making sessions it was noted that possessing the capacity or ability to do something did not, necessarily in and of itself, produce a sense of creative or artistic confidence. It was observed on occasions that other factors, such as: peer response, marked by either satisfaction or uncertainty when comparing their work to others; and concerns about ‘being right or wrong’ with respect to outcomes impacted on a sense of confidence demonstrated by a number of students. These responses appeared to either effectively enable or disable their artistically directed enterprise. The complexity of this theme requires greater attention than this article allows for but in a more generalised context it was observed in the majority of the A2E sessions that a reasonable proportion of students demonstrated increased confidence via:

- selection and use of materials with increased flexibility, skill and confidence – engaging with and manipulating a range of tools, materials and applications to produce increasingly individualistic outcomes;
- development of problem solving abilities which they shared with others;
- exploration of a range of approaches and made self-reflective judgments and decisions with respect to aesthetics beyond the level of instructions given;
- sharing of tacit knowledge with older students and teacher; and
- negotiations with teachers/staff around changes in timetabling of other activities to allow continuing attendance at art excellence sessions.

Some students were quick to develop confidence in their artistic expression – “can I try that?” – a student’s request to simulate a Jackson Pollock ‘Blue Poles’ approach to his art making after a discussion on Expressionism. When compared to the other students, this student often demonstrated a flexible, innovative approach to his work, concerned more with the process than the eventual outcome. He seemed less concerned with notions of what was ‘right or wrong’ to achieve ‘correct’ production outcomes than several of the other students. One key observation made by the artist/instructor and the supporting teacher-aide was the difference in overt confidence demonstrated by the majority of students in the ‘junior group’ (Year 1 to 3). When both groups were presented with the same thematically based ‘project’, materials and instructions, most often students in the junior group ‘dived straight in’ with a personal response and expression, whereas it was noted that more students in the senior group (Year 4 to 7) withheld their response until they had ‘confirmed’ its correctness or appropriateness in some way. This confirmation process was conducted via non-verbal comparison to the others, sitting back watching and then copying what they had observed or tentatively starting, observing others work and then changing their own to a ‘copy’ of the other student’s work. At times verbal reference was made, “hey ... I like yours better... I think I will change mine...” Some students also asked a number of “is it okay if I do this or that?” questions of the adults in the room.

Other observations included the increased development of students’ confidence in technical skills – “...It’s ok, I can mix it myself now...” – an enthusiastic comment from a young student to the artist/instructor. This student had previously struggled with mixing the ‘right colour’ and had often called on the artist/instructor to ‘do it’ for her; students, over time, needed less prompting to make well considered choices when selecting equipment, for instance: rather than continue to use one large flat brush whether painting the background or finer details in the foreground of a work, students were less likely to need reminding to think about what was the best choice of tool or piece of equipment to get the desired results. Some students showed marked increases in confidence as they took risks with their work and their approach to their work through the use of unexpected; colour combinations, innovative

perspectives, combination of materials, inclusion of design elements and compositional details – “...that’s different...I would never have thought to look at it like that...” – comment on a student’s work by classroom teacher-aide.

Some parents reported anecdotally on their perceived improvements in their child’s growth in self-confidence over the course of the program. Individual student responses to some arts based activities clearly indicated the positive impact on their confidence levels and sense of self-worth. One parent reported in particular that her son (a Year 5 student from the school’s academically ‘gifted and talented’ program – and not identified as artistically so) who had participated an extra-curricular art making activity, responded most positively to being acknowledged as ‘bright’ and having produced ‘good art work’ by a neighbour who had specifically gone to see his work at a Gallery exhibition. The mother reported that her son was “a little perplexed at first” (apparently questioning that someone would go especially to see his work/exhibition), “then he straightened up and smiled” when the neighbour’s compliment was repeated. The mother said she thought he looked “proud of himself”.

“This has been the best day of my whole school life” was a comment made by a Year 7 student after he had engaged in a 2 hour artist-in-residence mosaic workshop conducted in Term 2 – 2012. His parents were surprised and very pleased with his unexpected response to an art making experience. Although this student demonstrated a mature and thoughtful approach to the art making project during the workshop, he also seemed quite challenged and perplexed at times and required a little more reassurance about his progress than other students who happily buzzed about their works. By the end of the session he seemed very proud of his mosaic piece and thanked the artist/teacher profusely for the ‘opportunity to make some art’. The student commented that this was the ‘first time’ he had made art and ‘he was very happy with the outcome’.

When the student’s mosaic art works were being installed on a wall in the school grounds this student came every day to inquire about when his piece would be added. His work was one of the last to be put in place, but his keenness did not wane over the ensuing weeks and finally he was able to gaze, almost in wonderment it seemed, at his small mosaic creation sitting in situ. The story later unfolded that this student was known in the school as a mathematical ‘genius’ and had been offered secondary scholarships from several top schools in the area. Yet despite his obvious mathematical brilliance, previous accolades and no doubt numerous other activities undertaken in seven years of primary school education, it seemed apparent that a ‘first time’, short, two hour engagement in an art making experience had had a major personal impact on this young person.

The Lens of Pedagogy

Through the lens of pedagogy, a professional development program was offered to teaching staff with the purpose of promoting the integration of visual arts in the process of teaching and learning. This program offered teaching staff mentoring and professional development opportunities to grow personal confidence and capacity in art making and to ‘find the arts’ in their classroom curriculum planning.

Throughout Australia music, dance, drama, media and visual arts have been merged into the Arts Key Learning Area (while remaining recognised as five distinct arts subjects, with opportunities for integration). This now places the generalist primary school teacher responsible for the delivery of The Arts in their classrooms. The situation is currently exacerbated by there being little support for teachers interested in teaching the Arts after they graduate (Jeanneret, 1997; Russell-Bowie, 2002) and minimal professional development in the Arts offered to primary school teachers (DEEWR, 2008; Pascoe et al., 2005).

Teacher education in Australia has been criticised for its failure to produce teachers with the necessary confidence to teach even the simplest levels of artistic skills (Alter, Hays, & O’Hara, 2009; Power & Klopper, 2011). Added to this, most students enter their teacher education courses with limited formal education in the Arts and, despite this, face-to-face time for arts education in these courses is constantly decreasing (Power & Klopper, 2011; Klopper, 2007).

The motivations for offering this component of the program arose from the acknowledgment that the generalist primary school teacher now carries increased responsibility for the delivery of a quality arts program in their classrooms. It was further recognised by the leadership in this program that there is little support for teachers interested in teaching the arts after they graduate and too few professional development opportunities available to primary school teachers to increase and enhance personal confidence in their own art making skills and abilities.

Responding to research that suggests the level and quality of ‘arts in the classroom’ may be linked to a teacher’s level of confidence in their own perceived arts abilities, this program component offered identified teachers ‘in-school’ real world opportunities to explore, extend and enhance their own knowledge, understandings, skills and confidence in learning in, with and through the arts in their own classrooms. While the capacity existed to mentor only two identified teachers in this pilot program, it was envisioned that these two staff would be key individuals who would further extend the outcomes of the arts based program through a collegial ‘flow on’ effect.

Four key objectives were identified for this component of the A2E program aimed at providing:

- participation opportunities for two identified teachers in art excellence art making sessions to foster the experiential enhancement of their own knowledge and skills, leading to the development of personal confidence and professional capacity in the visual arts;
- more professional development opportunities for the primary school teaching staff as a whole to assist in ‘finding the Arts’ in their classroom planning and practice;
- mentoring and consultative opportunities with an arts educational specialist, to support teachers’ own enterprise to embed quality arts practices in the classroom;
- opportunities to engender a collegial sharing of knowledge, expertise; and enjoyment of arts based educational practices beyond the scope of the art excellence program.

Teacher Eligibility and Selection

Teacher participation in the weekly art making sessions was voluntary – and dependent on availability of time to attend the sessions. The school leadership was responsible for the selection of participating teachers, as well as timetable arrangements involving arts based professional development sessions with the whole school staff.

No teaching staff attended the in-school art making sessions in response to the opportunities offered in respect to the arts based professional development. On the one hand teachers recognise their limitations about teaching the arts; on the other hand they don't make use of the opportunity offered in this research project. At the commencement of the program the teaching staff attended one professional development session, but timetabling issues prevented further participation in this vein. One school staff member, a teachers-aide was assigned to the program by the school leadership, as she was involved already in (ad hoc) opportunities to work with small groups of students in the execution of mural art works on the external walls of a building in the school grounds.

The creative partnership that evolved ‘in-the-classroom’ between the art specialist/instructor, the teacher-aide² assigned to the program and the various students who attended the sessions was a key element in successful achievement of a number of stated objectives. From the outset this teacher aide was enthusiastic about art making and engaged fully with the art making activities. Typically she also self-selected to share her art making experiences with a

² In Australia the role of a teacher-aide is to assist teachers in classroom situations, and offer extra support to individual students in need of it. From this standpoint, it is of particular interest that the teacher-aide played a greater role in this program than any teacher.

number of colleagues and classroom teachers with positive and creative results. She modeled excellent pedagogical classroom practices by working on her own art work along-side the students, some of whom looked to her for example and creative ‘ideas’ as they engaged in their own practice. She displayed her art works on the walls of her office space which was frequented by many students and colleagues providing a visual display of her own work and promoting the value of the A2E program to other members of the school community. Although generally deferring to the artist/instructor as the ‘specialist’ and ‘owner’ of the program, this individual increasingly offered feed-back, structural ideas and observations that reflected on the design and delivery of the weekly art making sessions.

The same staff member was ‘key’ in the process of collegial classroom sharing of a number of art making activities experienced in the art excellence sessions. Task sheets were available for each activity and with the experiential examples of her own work in a ‘visual diary’ she was enabled to share these artistic experiences with other teachers and students alike, thereby extending the scope of the program and cementing a developing sense of this individual’s art making confidence. From this teacher aide’s original stance of “I’m not sure why they picked me [to assist with the A2E classroom sessions] ... I am just here to make sure the students behave properly ... and duty of care of course” her position changed over time to one of collaborator, collegial mentor and ‘co-constructor’ of the program.

The Lens of Community Dynamics

The lens of community dynamics allows investigation into two of the multi-dimensional approaches forged by the A2E program. One dimension was concerned with the creation and installation of ‘visual learning art works’ at various locations within the school precincts. This aspect of the program originated from the brief of the school’s leadership team to create a series of educationally inspired visual art works to be installed at various locations within the school setting. A small working team was assembled, including specialists in community arts and architecture who consulted with teaching staff and school leaders to gather ideas via a list of ‘wants and whys’ to transform the school environment into what was titled ‘a visual learning feast’ by the school’s Principal.

From this consultation process plans were developed to advance a ‘visual learning art works initiative’ through a collaborative process directed by a small committee, formed to carry the ideas forward. The committee included: a member of the school leadership team; two parents from the school; a member of the Parents and Friends (P&F) committee; the art specialist; and a support teacher from the school staff. Included in this process were a number of opportunities for interested members from the whole school community to enter into the role of collaborative ‘co-creators’ through engagement in art making endeavours which Seidel et al. (2009) claim promotes ‘multiple values’ of communication, collaboration, respect and

trust. In this context, the implementation team considered the values of clear communication, inclusion in a collective effort that created art works beyond the capacities of any one individual and the respectful development of meaningful community informed arts based learning experiences in a safe and supportive environment would also assist in the development of confidence and capacity in those who participated.

This component of the program was not embraced by the school community as a whole. Of the possible activities offered, one parent working with the art specialist and eight students took advantage of school holiday workshops to create a number of small mosaic images. Three other related art works were created and installed by a community artist and art specialist with no input from members of the school community. The anecdotal data collected around this process of design and installation of art works through community participation conveyed a prevailing view that although the art works were bright and colourful “the works would be vandalized in no time” ... “we get a lot of kids through here on the weekends you know” and “they wreck the place” also it was often reported that the school “would probably be pulled down and replaced soon anyway so why do all of this work”. A further theme emerged related to the apparent ‘ownership’ of the program and hence its activities. Although the University research and design team had been invited into the school by the Principal and administratively supported by the extended leadership team, the lead author, responsible for the program implementation, noted that many in the school community made continual references to ‘your’; “it’s your program, you tell me”... teacher aide commented when faced with oversubscription of gifted and talented students ... “we have no where to store your stuff” ... response of school grounds man to request to store tiles for mosaic mural project... “when will you have your mural finished?” teacher to artist.

The second dimension viewed through this lens related to the relationship dynamics generated in the classroom art making activities through the interactions of art instructor, teacher aide, students and volunteer adults. Seidel et al. (2009) proposes that a defining characteristic in a quality learning experience is the ‘quality’ of the interaction or ‘dynamic’ to be observed between members of a community, be it the larger macro space occupied by the whole-of-school and broader community surrounding the school, or the micro space of the classroom occupied by a small group of selected ‘co-inhabitants’.

This dynamic is strongly linked to the learning experience and the essence of quality at its heart which calls for open communication, respect and trust above all else. This trust and respect must be evident “among all participants and come with a belief in student capacities” (Seidel et al., 2009, p. 38). At the outset of this project some students arrived at the door of the classroom in a state of confusion. They had been told by their teachers to just come without any explanation. Yet over time clear evidence emerged of students communicating and

collaborating with each other as they exchanged comments and reflections on each other's works, or demonstrated, on request, how they came to mix a particular colour or achieve a certain effect judged to be the mark of a "really, really, good artist, Miss, much better than me".

Trust and respect grew as students from different year levels in possession of different levels of confidence and competence adjusted to a new classroom environment and form of learning experience. This was evidenced by the risks many students, (particularly in the younger group) were prepared to take as they experimented with new ideas and techniques. In the older group respect was expressed more by cooperative behaviour and supportive, confidence boosting comments to and about others "he's real good at art, he should be in here too". Respectful student-to-student and student-to-adult interactions reflected what Seidel et al. (2009) call a 'hallmark of quality'.

Adjustments also had to be made by the adults co-inhabiting the learning and teaching space. In describing their portraiture methodology Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffmann Davis (1997) scope out the boundaries to be crossed when an 'out-sider' (even one who is invited) enters hitherto unknown territory in order to effectively merge and take on attributes of an 'in-sider' in order to work in and with a community to accomplish what is perceived to be a valuable task. The challenge in this instance was to develop enough trust to allow a creative endeavour between an out-sider (a specialist in art based education) and an in-sider (school based teacher aide) to grow into a partnership of trust. Both adults brought specific specialist qualities to the enterprise. The art specialist was focused on the creative process of innovation, experimentation and expression while the teacher aide was focused on students' normal classroom behaviour i.e., sitting still, being quiet, listening to the teacher 'teach', following instructions and producing the final 'product' within the allotted time. These two divergent approaches needed to be integrated and reshaped in order for both adults to engage effectively and deliver quality art based learning experiences in the classroom.

By placing 'quality', as described by Seidel et al. (2009), at the center of the A2E program and related interactions, a mutually respectful relationship was developed adult-to-adult and adult-to-student. Over time this sense of respect formed into a valuable asset, particularly in the face of growing environmental stressors. It became both the glue and the tension that acted as a catalyst for innovation and collaboration in teaching and learning experiences for all co-inhabitants of the art making space. A demonstrated respect and authentic interest in each other's approach to making art contributed to an increased confidence and capacity in both individuals to negotiate a number of boundaries. "I enjoy working with you, I don't want the program to end like that" – comment of teacher aide when the program was threatened with early closure due to funding related issues.

The Environment Lens

This was the lens applied in the consideration of the ‘place’ of the arts in the physical, educational, socio/cultural and philosophical life of the school community and the view through this lens informed many of the multi-layered, multi-directional approaches taken by the design and implementation team when considering the appropriate model of arts based program for this specific environmental setting. The environmental lens focused on aspects such as: the time allocated to the various art based activities and programs; the space in which the art activities took place; the available resources – both material and physical (built and human).

The implementation of a quality art based program requires close attention to issues such as physical resources, the (in this case art related) functionality of the space provided and time allocated to the art activities in ‘block’ hours and length of program provided to ensure the students’ ability to engage in authentic artistic work. The initial curriculum for the visual art excellence sessions required modification to accommodate:

- the functionality of the space available – a multi-use science room in a recently constructed building, with pale grey walls and floors, mobile tables and mobile, cloth covered chairs, very little wall space for the display of student’s works or art related visual stimulation;
- time allocation – each art excellence session was divided into a 20 minutes pre-lunch and 60 minutes post-lunch time frame (across both groups some students returned to the classroom to work on their art during lunch play time); the selected students were broken into two groups – Years 1 to 3 (juniors) and Years 4 to 7 (seniors) and these groups attended the sessions on alternate weeks over eight weeks per term; and
- the resources – art equipment such as easels, drying racks (for paintings), drawing boards, shelving (for clay work) was not available and physical resources such as storage for materials were very limited.

As this was a pilot program, and in view of the stated aims of quality and excellence in arts education, a number of implementation processes were trialed during the first two terms to find the balance between: time allocated (including breaks for lunch); numbers of students nominated and selected; and functionality of the available space, available resources and art making equipment.

Issues relevant to this lens were key in the modification of the initially planned A2E program and to some degree impacted on the number of students who could participate in the program overall. The multi-use nature of the classroom meant that the students’ art work, either completed or in progress, had to be packed away after each session and no visual stimulus could be left on display. Works needed to be packed away after each session in very

restrictive containers that were then stacked in a small cupboard – this led to restrictions in the size of work, the surfaces to be worked on and the type of materials that could be used (quick drying only). The time allocated was interrupted by a lunch break, which included 20 minutes of ‘play’ – this caused some issues with some students wanting to come back to the session during play and others wanting to stay out and play. Three students (Year 3 and 4) self-selected to leave the program. Although they enjoyed making art, they did not want to miss out on playing with their friends – I like doing art...but I play soccer with my friends at lunch (Year 4 male student – one of two boys still coming to the art making session in Term 3 of the second year of the program).

The lunch break in the session also impacted on the lesson plan and ultimately the ‘style’ of instruction. Quality art based programs call for ‘sufficient time’ to allow for students to enter a ‘state of flow’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). This break in the structural and creative ‘flow’ of the art making sessions counteracted many of the aimed for benefits of the program. Also due to the break in the session some students would go back to their normal class at the end of the play period. This caused disruption in the class as various students offered to chase them – “I saw him go off to class Miss...can I go after him...please?” Due to the available space a secondary ‘break’ also occurred. The total number of students was broken into two groups (junior and senior) and each group attended one 90 minute session on a bi-weekly basis. The biggest impact of this break was in the creative and artistic continuity often felt by individual students. Several students would begin a work one week only to want to begin again the follow fortnight because they had lost the thread of their ideas, had lost interest in the subject matter, or “sorry Miss... I just don’t like it any more”. This response created a difficulty and increased sense of pressure that is counterintuitive to the artistic sense of ‘flow’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002).

Regardless of these multi-pronged pressures to ‘fully engage in the artistic process’ and to ‘produce a work of excellence’ within a disrupted, limited timeframe, many students responded positively to the opportunity not only to ‘make art’ but to develop an increased level of confidence in and through their art making enterprise.

Over an eight week term the students may only have engaged in six (disrupted) hours of art based activities. This may have been less for some who were absent from school on ‘their week’ with no opportunity to make up the time, yet there remained an enthusiasm, for the most part, in the students who attended each fortnight and an expectation that these students would produce one or several completed works of excellence. The impact on the overall benefits of arts based education by issues related to limited timeframes, lack of artistic continuity and the disruption to the creative ‘flow’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002) would require more investigation than is available in this report, which therefore includes the topic in the

following recommendations.

Conclusion and Implications for Further Research

Three main benefits are said to arise through creative partnerships programs. They include: improving children's learning and experiences; improving schools; and empowering people (Bamford, 2008). In this context a considered review of the A2E program revealed that in the implementation of this particular creative partnership there were multiple versions or views of excellence and multiple complexities of expectations, beliefs, attitudes and understandings that in many ways influenced the final outcome. For all of the noted complexities there are some very clear indicators of achievement of stated aims particularly in terms of student learnings and leanings towards an attitude of excellence through the development of personal confidence and capacity. This improvement, related to art making, was also noted in the one staff member – the teacher-aide – who engaged in the art activities and felt empowered to share her visual art making experiences with other members of the teaching staff.

There does not seem to be a simple formula for outright or immediately observable success with respect to arts based programs in primary schools, and each setting brings an individual cultural identity to the table, although, as experienced and noted in a number of programs, one main ingredient does appear to work against success, that is the misalignment of expectations between a number of the decision makers. Seeking alignment between the program's purposes, visions of excellence (quality) and programmatic decisions must be a priority for any research or leadership team intending to enter a worthwhile creative partnership.

The overarching implications for the visual arts in this project lie not with the failure of the arts themselves to communicate and engage the wider community but in the more complex nature of investigation and dialogue engaged by the decision makers in the pre-planning phase of the project. More investigation and dialogue was required, firstly to clarify, communicate and align a set of expectations that would underpin the aims and objectives of the project, and secondly to understand how the broader school community saw itself engaging in a visual art based project. The picture emerging from these 'complexities' of 'factors, actors and settings' (Seidel et al., 2009) is nuanced by encultured and traditional educational practices, personal beliefs related to art making and newly formed relationships within a creative partnership. For all decision makers, a mix of personal and professional attitudes attached to 'the visual arts' may express themselves through differing notions associated with terms such as 'gifted', 'talented', 'excellent', 'technically skilled', 'expressive'; such attitudes may also be expressed in how the Arts are used, such as art as self-exploration, art as an educational practice, art as reward, art as decorative expression, art as self-expression and art as busy work. In this context Seidel et al. (2009) suggest that there are particular challenges and ramifications for

individuals undertaking different roles.

It is also important to return to ‘the heart of the matter’ (Seidel et al., 2009) and consider the implications of the overwhelming response of students, teachers and parents to the possibility of regular engagement in a quality art program. For students it is important to see themselves as decision makers and understand that they can influence their own learning experiences; it is important for teachers to focus on the learning experience of the students and understand that the greater value of engaging in the arts resides in the students’ art making process or learning experiences which represent the primary product and lessen the focus on the material product as an exemplar of excellence.

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Anne McMahon is an early career researcher currently completing her doctoral thesis in education driven by a strong focus on arts based education. Anne's research focus reflects her long term engagement with the visual arts spanning three decades, encompassing a personal art practice, a commitment to community arts and arts advocacy for adults and children, a secondary art teaching career, where she received a number of awards for arts based cross-circular projects, and a lecturer to pre-service teachers across primary and secondary levels. More recently Anne has taken a lead role in two longer-term creative school based partnerships that continue to underpin her research narrative.

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