

## Arts Integration in an Early Childhood Education Setting: The Role of the Teacher

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Citation: Stevens-Ballenger, J. Wilson, E. (2024). Arts integration in an early childhood education setting: The role of the teacher. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 25(26). <http://doi.org/10.26209/ijea25n26>

### Abstract

This paper presents research undertaken in an early learning centre in Melbourne, Australia. The first of four case studies, it explores how arts practices and pedagogies can be embedded within and integrated across an early childhood centre curriculum, with a focus on the role of the teacher in achieving this. Twenty-one children aged 3-to-5 years and three experienced early childhood teachers chose to participate in the study. A broad range of ethnographic data was collected over a 10-week period, including digital artefacts, interviews and conversations, teachers' documentation, and observation notes. Inductive methods were used to analyse the data. The findings revealed that the role of the teacher in integrating the arts is complex and multifaceted, with nine pedagogical themes identified. Using examples from the data to illustrate how the themes presented in the classroom, the findings are framed by three overarching themes: planning for learning, responsive teaching, and documenting learning.

## **Introduction**

While the benefits of the arts for young children's learning and development are well established in the literature (Bamford, 2006; Barrett et al., 2012; Ewing, 2010), early childhood teachers frequently report a lack of confidence to implement the arts in their daily programs (Garvis, 2012). This is compounded by the ever-diminishing number of hours devoted to arts education in pre-service teacher education courses (Cain et al., 2023), and the lack of opportunities for pre-service early childhood teachers to experience examples of best practice.

There are significant practice and contextual differences between school and early childhood settings. The embedding and blending – i.e., integration – of the arts across all areas of the curriculum, for example, is accepted as the ideal way to learn in and through the arts in early childhood (Hayes et al., 2021), and the ways in which the arts are used for documentation and assessment of learning (Dahlberg, 2011) is unique to early childhood contexts. Unfortunately, there are limited examples of how these practices are realised in the research literature. Early childhood teachers are expected to plan, implement, and assess children's learning across all curriculum areas. While some services may offer specialist arts programs, the generalist early childhood teacher is responsible for the integration of the arts in and across the children's daily program (Jeanneret & Stevens-Ballenger, 2013). Where a specialist program exists, it is frequently disconnected from the generalist program, with the specialist teacher focusing on the development of arts-specific skills (learning in the arts) and the early childhood teacher focusing on holistic, cross-curricular learnings (learning across and through the arts) (Jeanneret & Stevens-Ballenger, 2013).

The arts can be used as a way for children to deepen their understanding of concepts within and across all learning areas by engaging in embodied ways of knowing while simultaneously offering a vehicle in which to make these understandings visible (Eckhoff, 2019). When the arts are placed at the centre of the early childhood curriculum, threads can be drawn between multiple learning domains, and the visibility of learning expressed through children's arts artefacts provides early childhood teachers with valuable documentation for assessment (Gandini, 2005).

In response to the limited examples of arts integration in early childhood education research literature, this paper explores how arts practices and pedagogies can be embedded within, and integrated across, an early childhood centre curriculum, with a particular focus on the role of the teacher in achieving this. The aim of the paper is to present a case study of current practice that in-service and pre-service early childhood teachers might use to inform their own teaching.

### ***The Role of the Teacher***

Early childhood teachers draw from a rich repertoire of pedagogical approaches (Cliffe, 2022). In Australia, the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (ACECQA, 2022) describes pedagogy as holistic, integrated and interconnected; responsive to children; play-based with intentionality; and driven by documentation.

A holistic, integrated, and interconnected approach recognises the important connections between early childhood education and children, families, and communities (Frydenberg et al., 2022; Hayes & Filipovic, 2018; Malaguzzi, 1994). These connections are underpinned by reciprocal relationships and partnerships for learning (Edwards, 2011; Murphy et al., 2021). Learning is a social and collaborative activity, and community and family involvement is valued (Edwards, 2011; Frydenberg et al., 2022). Connections are also made with the natural world and care for the environment, as well as the interconnected nature of the human and the more-than-human world (Malaguzzi, 1994; Spiteri, 2022).

Responsiveness refers to tuning into children and responding in ways that align with children's interests, strengths, and abilities (Lagerlof et al., 2023). The role of the teacher is to notice and extend children's learning, primarily through questioning and feedback (Malaguzzi, 1994).

The role of the teacher in play-based learning with intentionality involves planning and creating environments that promote and support different types of play while building on children's interests and curiosities (Epstein, 2014; McLaughlin & Cherrington, 2018). Teachers make decisions about when to join in play and when to stand back and observe, at times acting as co-learners and collaborators with children (Edwards, 2011; Pyle & Danniels, 2017). The Reggio Emilia approach conceives of this on a continuum from learning to wait to become totally involved (Edwards, 2011; Malaguzzi, 1994). Teachers also use intentional teaching strategies to extend children's learning, such as asking questions, explaining, and modelling (Epstein, 2014). Posing important questions is emphasised in the Reggio Emilia approach (Edwards, 2011; Malaguzzi, 1994). This teaching strategy encourages children to think deeply about concepts and offers new ideas that teachers can build on when planning for further learning.

Assessment in early childhood education is part of the ongoing 'planning cycle', a non-linear process that includes observing, documenting, analysing, planning, implementing, and critical reflection (Neaum, 2022). Children's voices and contributions to assessment can - and should - be captured by teachers, with children also becoming actively involved in documenting their own learning (Deans & Brown, 2008; Dahlberg, 2011; Gandini, 2005; Malaguzzi, 1994).

## **Methodology**

This paper presents data and early findings from research undertaken in an early learning centre (ELC) in Melbourne, Australia. The first of four ethnographic case studies (Cresswell, 2007), the research took place in a 49-place ELC within a K-12 independent school setting. Twenty-one children chose to participate in the study, with twelve of these children attending the centre's funded kindergarten program for children aged 3 and nine attending the funded kindergarten program for children aged 4. Three experienced early childhood teachers also chose to participate. Data was collected over a 10-week period, with the researcher visiting and engaging in the kindergarten programs one day each week.

A broad range of data was collected, including observation notes, digital artefacts, interviews and conversations, and teachers' documentation. Children were engaged as research consultants, becoming involved in the making of data (for example, creating artworks), recording learning processes (for example, using an iPad to photograph their environments), analysing data (for example, completing drawing-tellings), and presenting findings to their parent community (for example, through exhibitions and performances) (Barton, 2015). This provided the child's perspective of arts integration and positioned the children as active and knowledgeable contributors to the early learning curriculum (Rinaldi, 2005).

Unstructured and open observations of the programs were undertaken by the researcher to gain first-hand insight into how the arts were integrated in, and across, the curriculum over the data collection period. The researcher made handwritten notes, which were transcribed as soon as practicable following each session. These observations provided a reference point for discussion during subsequent semi-structured interviews with the teachers. Informal conversations took place with the children during the sessions, which the researcher also recorded through handwritten notes. The researcher took photographs and short videos of arts integration practices and pedagogies observed in the centre and collected a range of children's work samples, including visual artworks and reflective drawings. Documentation from the teachers - both planning and reflective - contextualised the other data as well as adding further detail.

Data analysis was undertaken using ethnographic data analysis processes (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), which included an inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) and photo elicitation (Epstein et al., 2006). The inductive thematic analysis involved distilling and reducing the large amount of qualitative data and searching for patterns across the data. Key themes emerged through this inductive process. Data analysis began with transcription of the researcher's handwritten observation notes, transcription of the interview data with teachers, and organisation of the diverse media collected (photographs of arts integration in practice, short videos, and children's work samples). At first, to become familiar with the content, all

data was read and re-read. Early codes were formed, and a formative analysis was generated. These initial codes were assigned to a single idea, which could vary in length from a phrase to a sentence, and were then combined into larger categories. Connections in the categories were identified, and those that overlapped were merged. Through this process, the data was significantly reduced, and the key themes were consolidated (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

The following section presents findings from the case study, which focuses on the role of the early childhood teacher in arts integration. The findings are structured into three overarching themes: planning for learning, responsive teaching, and documenting learning. These themes and the more detailed related subthemes are discussed herein.

### ***Theme 1: Planning for Learning***

#### *Establishing and Communicating Learning Intentions*

While the early childhood teachers were open and encouraging of emergent and play-based ideas, the data revealed that they also planned for children's ongoing learning in and through the arts with intentionality. This planning included establishing clear learning goals, as well as connecting to theory to support these planning choices, using the EYLF (ACECQA, 2022). The teachers spoke of the importance of the EYLF in guiding their planning:

It's (the EYLF) in everything that we do, and the language. We're making sure it's holistic, that it's touching on all of the points. It's part of the planning cycle that teachers are doing, and our conversations. It's also how we write, for example, our documentations to families. (Teacher A, personal communication, 29 June, 2023)

As described by Murphy et al. (2021), this research revealed that the role of the teacher was to make this planning available to families, colleagues, and children. This was achieved in multiple ways. Planning documents were displayed prominently at the entrance to each room, as an invitation to parents to become engaged with the learning intentions. At the same time, they were shared with parents via the ELC's digital communication platform. Planned learning experiences were discussed informally between the three early childhood teachers, as well as more formally at curriculum-focused staff meetings. The teachers discussed learning intentions with the children when introducing new arts experiences, at times with a large group and, more often, individually with children as they began working within a particular learning space. The role of learning intentions in intentional teaching is also highlighted by McLaughlin and Cherrington (2018). One early childhood teacher also made learning intentions visible to the children by writing and displaying a summarised version of the learning intentions:

As a creative learner (teacher's emphasis), think about what you could design on your hessian (woven fabric).

Document your thinking by drawing your ideas.

Copy your design onto your hessian.

Be a persistent learner as you thread the wool through the eye of the needle. (Teacher C, personal communication, June 16, 2023).

As most of the children were not yet reading, it can be assumed that this summary was also for the parents who entered the classroom each morning and afternoon. According to Dahlberg (2011), the importance of involving families in the curriculum is central to the Reggio Emilia approach. It is similarly emphasised in the Version 2.0 of the EYLF (ACECQA, 2022), which the teachers were significantly influenced by.

### *Preparing the Learning Environments*



*Figure 1.* Examples of arts-based learning environments prepared by the teachers.

The preparation of aesthetic arts-based learning environments within the children's main classroom, such as those shown in Figure 1, is unique to early childhood. In primary and secondary settings, learning environments for the arts are most often found in dedicated 'arts rooms' or, where such facilities are not available, may be temporarily set up in the children's main classroom and then packed away when the lesson is over. The findings indicate that one important role of the early childhood teacher is to prepare arts-based learning environments for children to engage with throughout the day, every day.

The ELC teachers demonstrated that much care, thought, time, and skill are required to provide children with spaces to learn in and through the arts. During the data collection period, the teachers spent anywhere between three and five hours per week preparing each kindergarten room. The teachers took care to create spaces that would be visibly enticing for children, an act of great importance according to both Rinaldi (2005) and Vecchi (2010), who agree that young children are greatly receptive to, and affected by, their immediate environment. In order to achieve this, the teachers were required to relocate furniture and resources – sometimes weekly – and to source and pre-prepare professional quality art materials for the children.

While this may seem like a lot of work, one teacher described this process as personally fulfilling and as an outlet for her own creativity:

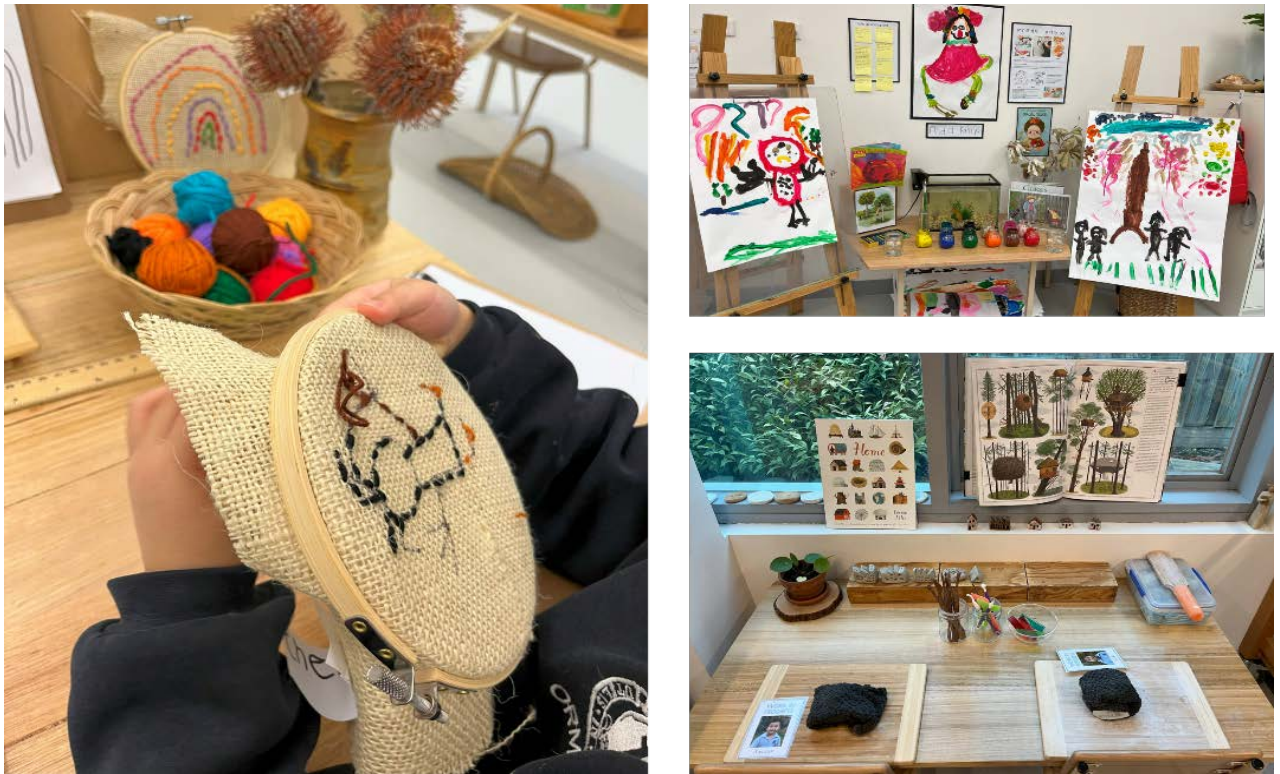
Teacher artistry – it’s everything from setting up a learning experience, thinking about the intentionality behind it, the medium that you’re using (Teacher A, personal communication, 23 June, 2023).

The teachers positioned the learning environment as the third teacher, intentionally designing spaces to provide children with choice and agency (Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2007; Edwards, 2011). When these spaces were visibly enticing, children felt compelled to work in the spaces without the teacher’s prompting. Pacini-Ketchabaw et al. (2017) noted accessibility as being key to learning, and this was evident in the observation data; spaces that were low, within eyesight of the classroom entrance, and with professional quality materials easily at hand, were the first to attract children each morning. While the teachers did engage in responsive teaching, as described by Lagerlof et al. (2023), oftentimes, the children were scaffolded through the environment while working independently or alongside peers. For this to be successful, it was necessary for the teachers to have a sound understanding of materials that could be easily manipulated by children without adult assistance.

Without teacher scaffolding, children have gravitated towards this space to experiment with different colours. The rainbow symbol is a representation that children have connected with and its inclusion of many colours. Over the two weeks, each child had a turn to draw a rainbow inspired by the learning environment.

When asked, “Why have you drawn a rainbow?”, Bonnie responded, “These are my feelings, like a rainbow. Some colours are dark, and some colours are happy”. (Teacher B, 25 May, 2023).





*Figure 2. A range of arts-based learning experiences are offered.*

The ELC teachers planned a wide range of arts-based learning experiences in a variety of art forms, with a range of materials, and in various groupings. Offering a breadth of opportunities was an important consideration for the teachers when they were preparing the learning environments; a practice Deans and Brown (2008) identified as valuable for arts education in early childhood.

I think when you look across your classroom and you see that every experience is drawing, for example, is that limiting children's creativity? Yes. What are the different mediums they could be using? What are the different ways they could be experiencing? (Teacher A, personal communication, 23 June, 2023)..

The children engaged in arts-based learning independently, in small groups, as a large group, and one-to-one with the teacher. In Figure 2, we see three learning experiences offered in the same classroom at the same time. A drawing-weaving experience is offered at a small table with a single chair, indicating to children that this is intended as an individual task. Side-by-side easels encourage parallel painting, and the clay table also suggests either individual or



parallel 3-dimensional art making. The clay table in Figure 1, however, was set for four children, showing that the teachers were mindful to provide multiple entry points for children even within the same artform. According to Aden and Theodotou (2019), this arts-based multimodal approach places children at the centre of learning.

### *Building Community Connections*

Another role of the early childhood teacher was to provide opportunities for children to connect with the wider community – an imperative in early childhood education, as noted by Frydenberg et al. (2022), among others. At the ELC, the kindergarten classes were observed engaging artistically with the broader school community, the parent community, and local Aboriginal elders. Examples of what the children learnt through establishing these connections were evident in the data.

The following excerpt has been extracted from one teacher's critical reflection documentation. It was written in the week after the teacher had arranged for the ELC children to visit the larger school campus to hear the junior school orchestra perform. It describes how the teacher worked with children to further develop ideas that were initiated by the older students in the school and the learning that emerged from this.

In recollection of last week's orchestra performance by the Year 5 and 6 students, the children have continued to explore emotions and narratives in music. During several group times, the children have been listening, watching, and analysing the musical composition Peter and the Wolf by Sergei Prokofiev, performed by the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra. Each character within this story is represented by a different instrument. (Teacher interview)

Using the arts as a way of connecting with families was an intentional strategy adopted by the teachers and was also recommended by Frydenberg et al., (2022). The teachers spoke of the importance of finding effective ways to communicate with a parent community who predominantly speak languages other than English at home. During the data collection period, the teachers were observed inviting families to attend an 'art gallery' event, in which children's artworks and annotated descriptions were displayed, as well as a choral performance where children shared songs learnt in the classroom.

Having a language barrier, having children who predominantly speak Mandarin or Cantonese as their first language, and families who also are the same, the arts play such a role in supporting them to communicate without having English as the common language (Teacher B, personal communication, 9 June, 2023).

The teachers had a long-established relationship with a local Aboriginal elder, and he was invited to visit and share knowledge with the children on four occasions throughout the year. During these visits, the elder used the arts to connect with the children: he shared grass weaving techniques with the children, supporting them as they created their own woven artworks; he played Aboriginal musical instruments while explaining how these were used in ritual and why this was of such importance to his people; and he engaged them in mark making and drawing using earth-based mediums. The importance of foregrounding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives through building connections with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is emphasised in the EYLF (ACECQA, 2022) and the research literature (Gower et al., 2021; Locke, 2022). The following teacher reflection provides an example of how the learning gained from this community connection was transferred back to the classroom:

The children were introduced to the ELC's Acknowledgement of Country. They were invited to share 'what they knew about Wurundjeri people' and 'why we need to acknowledge the First Nations of Australia', to which Saskia responded, "Wurundjeri people have lived here for a very long time and they look after Australia". Mimi responded, "Wurundjeri people are like... what's that man's name, he had a possum skin and helped us draw pictures (Teacher A, personal communication, 9 May, 2023).

#### *Teacher as Learner in the Arts*

To successfully plan for children's learning in and through the arts, the teachers engaged in a range of self-learning behaviours outside of the classroom. They familiarised themselves with different mediums, not only by accessing examples of how other teachers have used these mediums in their own classrooms, but by engaging directly in artmaking. 'Teacher as learner' is fundamental to the Reggio Emilia approach (Malaguzzi, 1994), and the teachers' engagement in outside arts study positioned them as such. Two teachers reported participating in a two-day intensive clay workshop while on school holiday leave, to learn more about clay techniques and tools. A focus on experiential and collaborative learning is identified as valuable by Hayes et al., (2021), and similarly, the learning-by-doing in this study was seen to provide the teachers with a better understanding of the affordances and limitations of different mediums and, in turn, their suitability for use in the early childhood classroom. In addition, through engaging within and beside the broader arts community, the teachers were able to seek expert advice about where to source high-quality art materials, a finding also consistent with that identified by Hayes et al. (2021). It was evident that this knowledge was transferred back to the classroom, with a range of professional quality mediums offered to the children (as shown in Figures 1 and 2).

The teachers also worked to become more knowledgeable about topics that were shown to be of interest to the children. They strove to find trustworthy sources of information about these concepts to include in their planning, with a view to extending the children's learning. They also engaged with theory and research about the arts to further deepen their understanding of their own practice and to justify their planning decisions. An example of how one teacher incorporated research into her planning documents is presented below:

Research undertaken by Kirschner and Tomasello (2010), once again reinforces naturalistic music-making involving singing, movement and beat that increase spontaneity in children when helping and sharing within a non-musical context, thus increasing children's prosocial behaviours towards unfamiliar others. Musical explorations support students in defining the difference between 'helping' and 'sharing' behaviours. Though similar in effect, music-making supported students to increase attention in their joint movement or action (Teacher A, personal communication, 21 August, 2023).

## ***Theme 2: Responsive Teaching***

### *Working Side-by-side with Children*



*Figure 3.* The teacher works side-by-side with the children.

The teachers at the ELC were observed working side-by-side with children to demonstrate art techniques, a strategy noted by Brown (2015) when he observed professional artists working with children. In Figure 3, we see two examples of this. In the photograph on the left, the teacher is modelling how to create a collage using strips of paper. She used teacher self-talk as she created her own artwork:

I can see in this picture of the bridge that there are lots of lines running across the page.

She then, without further explanation, replicated this in her own artwork using the collage materials. At this moment, the child's attention shifted towards the picture of the bridge. The child proceeded to add another horizontal element to her collage, and then went on to engage in her own self-talk:

Now I need the sticks to hold it up. (Teacher A and Child X, personal communication, 16 May, 2023).

In the photograph on the right (Figure 3), the teacher has entered a play scenario in which children were creating an interactive bridge installation. She is shown working collaboratively and emergently with children who are engaging in, what Brown (2015) refers to as, artful play – at times following their lead and at other times leading herself by offering new perspectives. In both examples, the teacher drew on her experience of play-based learning, intentionality, and the children's learning and development, to 'read the room'; using teacher artistry to know instinctively when to step in and when to stand back to allow the children to direct the continuation of their own learning. The flexibility and artistry involved in knowing when to step in and when to stand back is highlighted in the literature (Brown, 2015; Edwards, 2011; Lagerlof et al., 2023; Malaguzzi, 1994).

*Scaffolding Children's Learning*

*Figure 4.* Teachers question, listen, and offer new perspective to expand the children's repertoire of ideas.

The ELC teachers utilised a wide range of strategies to support and further children's learning and development, drawing on Vygotsky's (1978) concept of scaffolding. To begin, they observed, questioned, and/or captured children's ideas, both verbally and artistically. Writing from a Reggio Emilia perspective, Edwards (2011) highlights how questioning by teachers can lead to new understandings of children and their learning needs. Indeed, the teachers used the children's responses to their questions to carefully consider the children's existing knowledge and skills, before choosing an intervention strategy. In the scenario on the right in Figure 4, the teacher is seen observing two children working collaboratively to recreate an image from a picture book that had been recently explored as a whole class. The teacher positioned herself low at the table to minimise distraction and to view the image as the children did. She sat silently for several minutes before asking the children about their drawing. The discussion centred on both the art techniques they were choosing to employ to represent Bunjil, the eagle, and then progressed to asking the children to recall key elements of the picture book narrative. The teacher noted that one child was more confident in retelling the story than her peer, who appeared to be recreating the image from the book without an understanding of the meaning. The teacher responded to this in the days that followed by

revisiting the picture book story with the child several times, discussing the narrative alongside the daily Acknowledgement of Country, and then offering the book as a provocation in another art experience.

While the scenario above highlights how the planning cycle can support teachers to scaffold children's learning, other episodes observed were more 'in the moment' and immediately responsive; a teaching strategy that Edwards (2011) also notes as important in promoting learning. In the photograph on the left of Figure 4, the teacher is demonstrating an alternative way of thinking about a fern. She encouraged the child to take notice of how the leaves were attached to the centre stem and the small veins that ran through them. She explained how the structure helped water and minerals to be distributed across the entire plant, keeping it healthy. This teaching moment emerged when the child requested to draw and paint a second representative artwork of the fern. In her first attempt, the child observed and represented many key features of the object, including a large centre stem, leaves to each side, and a green colour. The teacher noted the disconnection of the leaves and identified a teachable moment – both in terms of observational drawing and in environmental education. Spiteri (2022) noted how connections can be drawn between young children's drawings and educating about the environment, and this was evident in the teacher's practice in this scenario.

### *Embedding the Arts in Routines and Transitions*

The teachers planned and implemented arts-centred routines as part of the daily program. According to Kirby et al. (2023), such practice has a long history of being adopted by early childhood teachers as a way of embedding the arts – and particularly music – in the curriculum. While the performing arts were not as dominant in the curriculum as the visual arts, music was observed routinely during whole-group transition periods. In each kindergarten room, when gathering together, the children and teachers were observed singing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander songs as a form of, or accompaniment to, an Acknowledgement of Country, an approach suggested by Atkinson (2017).

## ***Theme 3: Documenting Learning***

### *Sophisticated Documentation*



WEEK 7 Monday 21 August – Friday 25 August 2023

## There are so many [musical] notes like the stars, it's pretty and sparkles for everyone to see

Research Question: If kindness was a song, what would it sound like?

In the past two weeks, children have been openly sharing their love of music and musical skills during indoor learning times and Music with Mrs. Adams. During group time, the children participated in singing the Torres Strait Islander song, *Taba Naba. It's a funny song*, stated Chloe; *it makes me feel happy*, said Miya. *I didn't know that song at the beginning of the year and I was confused but then Kiki and Scarlett taught me to sing and now I know it*, reflected Xavier. *Kiki and I shared our music with Xavier, it was a kind thing, wasn't it?* asked Scarlett. *You can share lots of things, like... music, singing, drawing and painting, and building, so many kinds*, summarised Ariel.



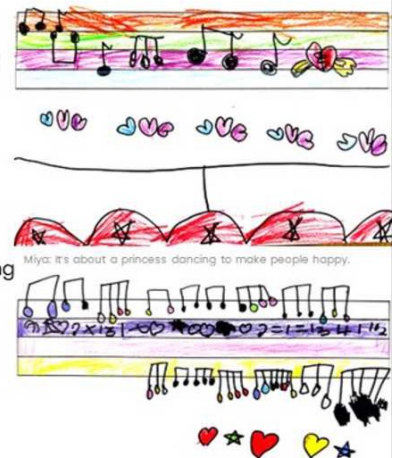
Artworks by Ariel, Jacqueline, Avina, Chloe, Miya and Xavier of their exploration into the orchestra and musical performance.

Interests such as these have supported children to make strong connections between performing and visual arts, which they have created in the past week (adding colour and details to their musical portraits). When asked **'if kindness was a song, what would it look like? What would it sound like?'** The children responded *It will sound happy and make you laugh* said Chloe; *or it might be soft and gentle like it's putting you to sleep* said Xavier; *Kind is giving hugs, can a song give you hugs?* questioned Ariel; *no!* responded Miya, *Hug can be in a book, a girl give hug to a boy* said Jacqueline, drawing reference to narratives and stories that can be told through music and song, such as the Sergei Prokofiev's musical composition 'Peter and the Wolf' performed by the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra.



Research undertaken by Kirschner and Tomasello (2010), once again reinforces naturalistic music-making involving singing, movement and beat that increase spontaneity in children when helping and sharing within a non-musical context, thus increasing children's prosocial behaviours towards unfamiliar others. Musical explorations support students in defining the difference between 'helping' and 'sharing' behaviours. Though similar in effect, music-making supported students to increase attention in their joint movement or action. Studies found evidence of

what researchers referred to as the 'ice-breaker effect', where musical activities such as singing support social bonding, where unfamiliar individuals who sang together experienced a faster social cohesion and closeness, in comparison to those who didn't engage in joint musical activities. Pearce, Launay and Dunbar (2015) found evidence that correlates spontaneous helping behaviours with music-

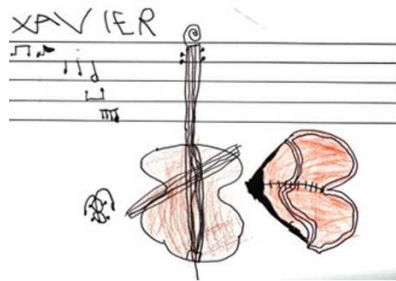


Miya: It's about a princess dancing to make people happy.

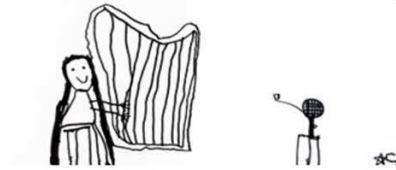
Avina: It is a song about a fairy that is going to sleep. There are many notes like the stars, its pretty and sparkles, for everyone to see.



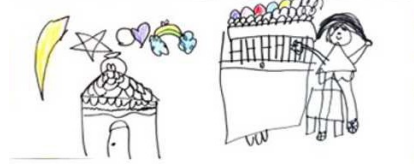
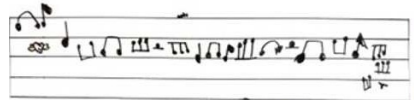
Monday 28<sup>th</sup> August – Friday 1<sup>st</sup> September 2 | WEEK 8



Xavier: Cello music: it goes up and then it goes down. Like you're going to sleep...a lullaby



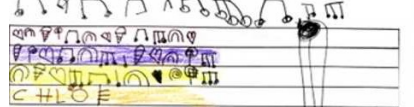
Scarlett: A harp song that is gentle and it's soft. The music is playing into the microphone to make it louder so everyone can hear.



Ariel: My song is about a home and a rainbow, a song to put a baby to sleep. A gentle song for Gabriel to sleep and I sing it.



Jacqueline: A band is playing together. The doggy is happy it listen to music



Chloe: My piano song goes round and round. Make people happy.

making, however, there were no parallels with increased sharing. The concept of sharing is dependent on the context and motivation of behaviours. Dunfield (2014) describes helping as an attempt to alleviate the negative state of instrumental need while sharing is motivated by unmet material desire. Accordingly, recent work on the behavioural effects of synchrony in preschool-aged children has differentiated between sharing and other prosocial behaviours like cooperation, suggesting that allocating goods may be uniquely context-dependent compared with more goal-directed collaborative behaviours.



During group time, the children listened to a reading of Nicola Davies' fictional book 'Every Child a Song'. The children were invited to engage in a dialogue behind the metaphor of **every child having their unique own song**. *I have my own song, it's called Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* responded Chloe; *I know that too*, said Xavier; *I know a different song and that makes me different* commented Scarlett; *Sometimes I make up my own song, it makes me different*, added Miya; *I am sing loud songs and I sing quiet songs* agreed Ariel; *Mummy sing-song to baby to feel quiet and safe* said Avina; *my heart makes a song, it's a quiet song, if you're really quiet you can hear it singing*, whispered Scarlett. *When I'm so excited my heart sings loud and it beats bang bang BANG!* contributed Jacqueline; *my heart goes fast and fast and fast* agreed Chloe. *When I am sleepy my heart is soft and it's gentle, it's very hard to hear, I sing quiet song to Aimee so her heart beat be soft and gentle and she goes to sleep* said Miya.

The metaphorical story of every child having their own melody has prompted children to make deeper connections between their identity and their emotions. Two driving factors that support children in their ability to develop empathy and compassion towards others. Without these fundamental understandings, children find difficulty in 'stepping into the shoes of others' and removing self-interest (Theory of Mind) to support the needs of their peers and the community. The following discussion highlighted children's ability to consider and think about literal and metaphorical concepts when it comes to their learning, and taking on the perspectives of others to expand their understanding of the world around them.

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Figure 5. The arts are embedded throughout the teachers' documentation.

Documentation is central to teaching and learning in early childhood education (Dahlberg, 2011). The extent to which this documentation captures and drives the curriculum is unique to early childhood and is rarely evident in mainstream primary and secondary school settings. At the ELC, the documentation was rich, sophisticated, multimodal, and visible. It was a major component of the early childhood teachers' ongoing practice and took many hours to develop and refine.

In documenting the children's learning, preference was given to the children's ideas over the teacher's, which is consistent with how Dahlberg (2011) describes the role of documentation in the Reggio Emilia approach. Through process photographs and artwork samples, the teacher analysed and demonstrated the learning that was, and had been, taking place in the classroom. According to Gandini (2005), this practice is important to early childhood learning and teaching. The documentation collected was a record for the teacher, as well as being shared with the children's families and the children themselves. Researchers such as Deans and Brown (2008) and Eckhoff (2019) highlight the important role of arts-based documentation in making young children's learning visible to a wide audience.

Figure 5 shows one of the many examples of how the teachers brought together the children's voices, the children's engagement in the program, and their artworks, which are an expression of their learning. Note how the teacher connected and justified the learning and teaching with theory, literature, and curriculum frameworks. At times, this was done before the implementation of learning experiences and, at times, afterwards. In this way, the documentation was used as both a formative assessment and summative assessment tool, as described by Gandini (2005), and as a form of critical teacher reflection, as noted by Dahlberg (2011).

### *Making Artistic Learning Visible*



*Figure 6.* The teacher supports the children to exhibit their artwork.

Finally, the role of the teacher was to make children's learning visible, a role that Edwards (2011) described as being effectively demonstrated by the teachers working in the Reggio Emilia schools. Documentation, as described above in section 3.1, was used to honour, share, and promote children's artworks and to make visible the learning within these works. Such practice was also affirmed as being Reggio-inspired by authors Dahlberg (2011) and Gandini (2005).

At the ELC, the teachers acted as curators, artfully presenting the children's artwork for an audience. The environment often appeared as part learning space and part gallery, with paintings, drawings, and 3-dimensional installations (as illustrated in Figure 6) filling the walls and ledges within and outside the classrooms. These were, without exception, accompanied by artist descriptions (i.e., "children's words" to describe the meaning of their works) and the teacher's interpretation of the learning expressed within, an arts-based practice that Deans and Brown (2008) noted as powerful in early childhood education.

The children's learning in the performing arts was made visible in two ways: firstly, through visual arts expressions of musical concepts (as seen in Figure 5) and through prepared choral performances for family audiences, where children performed songs on themes that were central to the curriculum. Making learning visible through the dramatic arts or creative movement was not observed by the researchers during the data collection period. Early childhood teachers' preference for teaching in and through the visual arts is well documented

(Bautista et al., 2018), and the subsequent challenges of making learning in and through the performing arts visible were evident. One teacher acknowledged her preference for making learning visible through the visual arts, stating, “There’s a safety to it” when compared with performing arts. In the visual arts, pedagogies are most often play-based and child-led – which the teacher noted were aligned with the ways in which she generally teaches across the curriculum. On the contrary, pedagogies relating to the performing arts can tend towards more ‘up-front’ performative approaches, such as a teacher leading a class of children in shared singing. The teacher reported feeling less confident adopting this role, which aligns with Garvis & Pendergast’s (2011) finding that early childhood teachers have higher self-efficacy in teaching visual arts when compared with performing arts.

### **Conclusions**

Through this research, we have demonstrated that the role of the early childhood teacher in integrating the arts is multifaceted and complex and requires strong pedagogic knowledge and practice. The teachers in this ELC adopted a range of pedagogies to support the children’s learning in and through the arts, particularly Reggio-Emilia inspired pedagogy as described by Edwards (2011), Dahlberg (2011), and Malaguzzi (1994). In addition, and in response to the EYLF (ACECQA, 2022), intentional teaching with play-based learning was influential. While many of these approaches to teaching are used across curriculum areas, there were three notable roles that were specific to the arts: the role of the teacher as a curator of children’s artworks; the teachers’ own development of skills and knowledge in the arts; and the preparation of arts learning environments. The participants in this study were all experienced early childhood teachers, and the level of complexity involved in navigating the complex role of the teacher when integrating the arts has implications for less experienced educators and pre-service teachers.

This research revealed that the teacher participants were more comfortable integrating visual arts into and through the curriculum. Visual arts were ubiquitous and central to the ELC program. Both 2-dimensional and 3-dimensional art experiences were observed throughout the day and were clearly an important part of everyday practice. Learning experiences in music, drama, and dance were observed less frequently. On the few occasions these art forms were included, they were performance-focused and had limited connection to other areas of the curriculum. This visual arts emphasis is also reflected in the relevant literature, such as that described by Bautista et al. (2018) in their study of arts pedagogies in an early childhood setting.

Case studies, such as the one presented in this paper, provide useful examples of current practice for pre-service early childhood teachers. They offer the opportunity for students to interrogate the ways in which more experienced early childhood teachers can and do integrate

the arts across the curriculum, to identify strengths and challenges in arts education, to better understand what it takes to implement an arts-centred curriculum, and to become inspired to do so.

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ISSN: 1529-8094

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