

Changing Perspectives: Contemporary Art Practices in Primary and Secondary Art Classrooms

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Abstract

This paper is a literature review of research on Contemporary Art practices in primary and secondary schools. The ability to understand and translate visual data is vital to one's ability to navigate through a complex world (Thulson, 2013), therefore, acquainting students with Contemporary art practices is essential for a broader literacy. The ability to understand visual 'language' is a teachable skill that can empower the classroom teacher to enable their students in creative and critical thinking (Charman & Ross, 2006). One of the most challenging tasks art teachers face is to explain 'meaning' in art that is sometimes deemed vulgar, meaningless or shocking (Emery, 2002). Understanding the historical context of an artwork, appreciating the reasons for its creation, articulating their significance and participating in the art making process, can help students gain confidence in their own abilities. Contemporary art in the classroom encourages these skills and becomes an aid to higher-order thinking, problem solving and deep reflection (Cox, 2000). Art educators, empowered with a broad knowledge of contemporary art and culture and having an understanding of the connections between art of the past and contemporary art are better able to enact relevant art education in primary schools beyond overly teacher-directed activities (Page et al., 2006). Content that will be presented include - Contemporary Art versus School Art, Contemporary Art as Age Appropriate, Curriculum Considerations, Cross-Disciplinary Considerations, Teacher Role and Approaches, Teacher-Student Power Relations, Teacher Challenges, Student Learning, Suitable Assessment – Formative vs Summative, Research Gaps and Directions for Future Research.

Keywords: Contemporary Art, Art Education, School Art, Primary and Secondary Classrooms

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Introduction

This paper details the literature review of scholarly work done on Contemporary Art (CA) practices in primary and secondary schools. It serves to examine the teaching and learning of CA in schools as well as benefits and challenges faced in the classroom. This literature review has also surfaced research gaps in the teaching of CA in schools.

Literature Review Methodology

The purpose of this literature review is to find relevant research that has been done in the use of CA in primary and secondary schools. My initial search for articles on CA in primary schools resulted in a lack of good quality articles. As I enlarged my search to include secondary school and eventually schools in general, more relevant articles were found. This is due to the fact that most research in CA practices in school occurs in secondary school, and most writers write about art education in general without specifying which grade they are writing about.

Ebscohost was used to search for peer-reviewed articles written in English. The databases include articles from Academic Search Premier, Communication & Mass Media Complete, Computer Source, eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), EconLit with Full Text, Education Source, ERIC, GreenFILE, Library Literature & Information Science Full Text (H.W. Wilson), MAS Ultra - School Edition, Philosopher's Index, PsycARTICLES, PsycCRITIQUES, PsycINFO, British Education Index, Teacher Reference Center to name but a few.

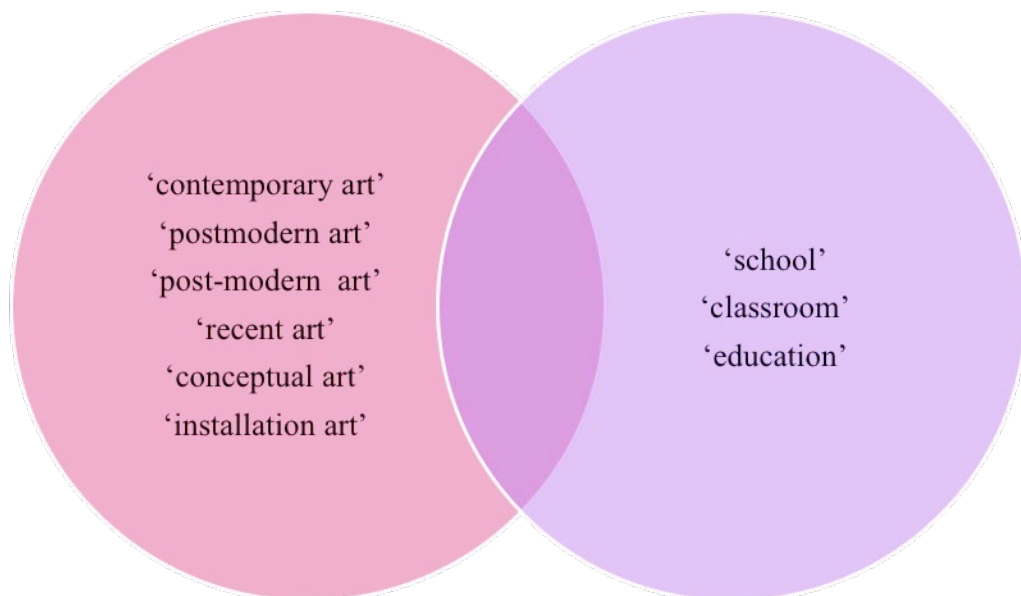


Figure 1: 2 Areas of Research

I started with 2 areas of research (figure 1). The first area was CA. Related keywords within titles and abstracts were terms such as, “contemporary art”, “postmodern art”, “post-modern art”, “recent art”, “conceptual art” and “installation art”. The second area was ‘school’, ‘classroom’ and ‘education’. The resulting hits were 930. After discounting repeated articles, there were a total of 603 hits.

Out of 603 articles, 44 papers were selected for analysis based on the following criteria: 1) studies published in peer-reviewed journals; 2) studies on issues related to the teaching, learning and practice of CA in school contexts; 3) studies that included primary and secondary schools. Articles were excluded if they were articles based on art therapy, art history, artists’ biographies or critiques on artworks, other arts-based subjects such as performing arts, music and dance, and studies set in tertiary education.

Literature	Quantitative	Qualitative	Mixed	Published	Unpublished	
Non-Empirical		24		24	0	
Empirical	1	17	2	20	0	
Total				44		

Table 1. Breakdown of papers identified and reviewed

Contemporary Art: An Open-ended Definition

As a relatively recent development in art, CA critiques and challenges its own history, especially one that is written from a largely western perspective. Therefore, one of the key elements of CA is a more contextual and culturally subjective understanding of art.

There are contesting starting dates for CA. Art historian Terry Smith (2009) considers CA to be art produced since 1980. However, others including Atkinson (2012), regard Marcel Duchamp the revolutionary artist who challenged the existing art world when he exhibited the infamous ‘Fountain’ in 1917, as the pivoting point in CA history.

We are all familiar with the intervention or the gesture of Marcel Duchamp during the second decade of the last century; a gesture in which he placed his readymade objects into a gallery context and in that very act disrupted and subsequently transformed the current architectonic or frameworks of understanding the existing notions of artist, artwork and practice as well as aesthetic discourse...to such an extent that ripples of the Duchamp event are still affecting practice today. (Atkinson, 2012, p.9)



Figure 2: Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, 1917

Discourses in CA in Southeast Asia is no less complicating as it takes on issues that reflect the multiple cultures and histories within the region that affects its art production, markets and trends (Kee, 2011). Kee (2011) laments,

...the idea of Southeast Asia is made impossible by the overwhelming diversity it encompasses. The sheer number of religions practised in the area alone – including, but not limited to, Catholicism, Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism – undermines any efforts to produce a comprehensive survey (pg. 374).

In the Singapore context, Sabapathy (2014) suggests the shift in Singapore art history occurred in 1973 when Cheo Chai Hiang (figure 3) wrote an impassioned letter to the Modern Art Society calling for a radical change in the ways art was practiced and perceived, “ways that he attributes as signaling or representing the contemporary...to actively deal with and give shape to the changing times” (pg. 36/37).

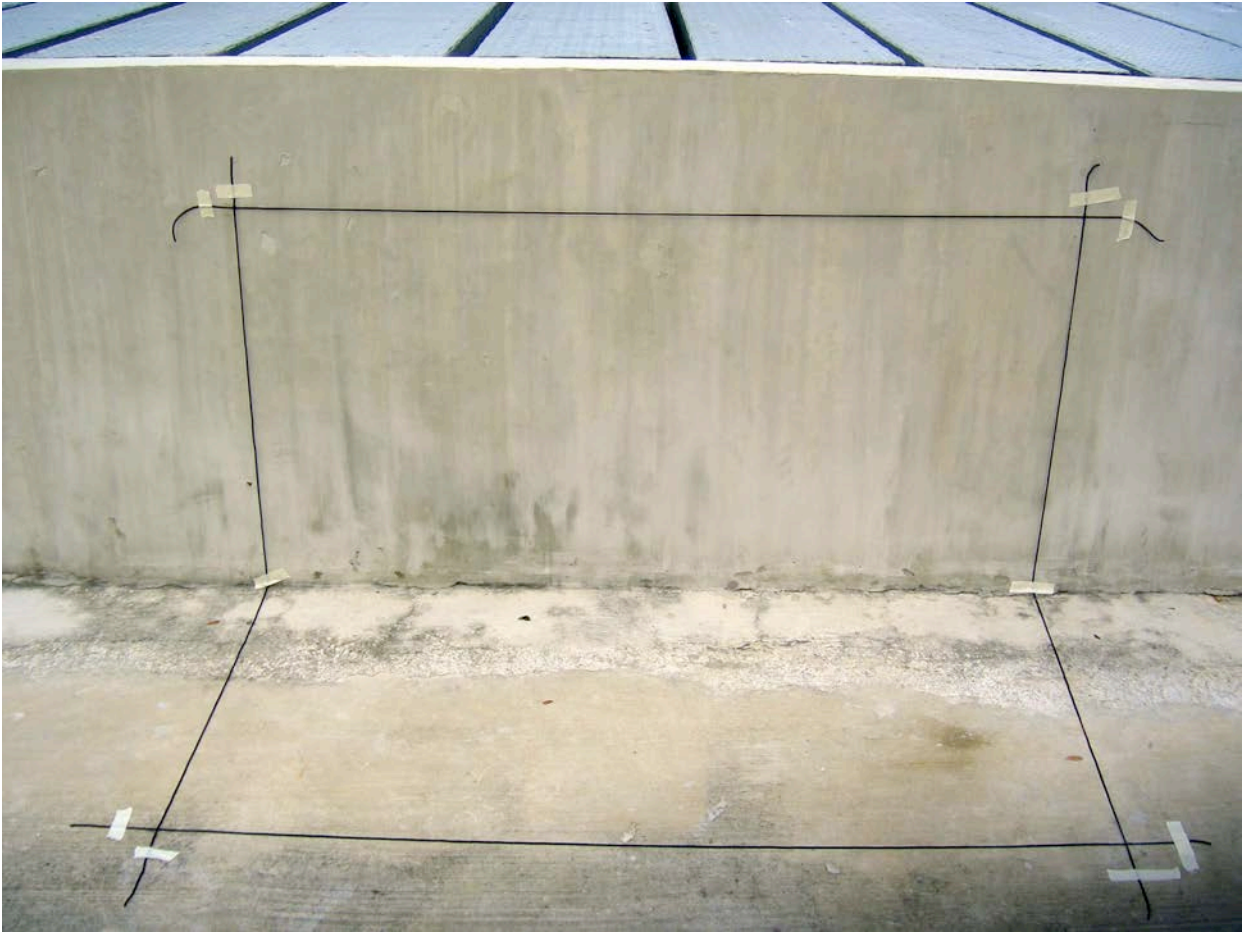


Figure 3: Cheo Chai Hiang's 5 x 5 (Singapore River), 1972

As evidenced, there is no single definitive meaning or history of CA, however, Smith (2009) proposes that it is distinct from Modern and Postmodern art, it is globalizing and has an acute understanding of art history within history and current events. Kemperl (2013) describes it as a social practice about current issues, and calls for active citizenship that offers solutions to our modern day crisis. Cox (2000) added that it accepts diverse voices and viewpoints from artists as well as viewers, it provokes community to engage with ideas and relevant issues, therefore encouraging dialogue (Sullivan, 2010). It can also be controversial, however, according to Emery (2002) shocking contemporary events and issues necessitates/instigates shocking tactics of engagement.

In Vygotsky's (1975) view, art presents the original and the most powerful weapon in the battle for survival, it is the most critical intersection of all biological and social processes of a person in society. Viewed in this context CA is part of this continuum and can challenge and assist us in discussing current social issues that can offer us a way out of our predicament (Kemperl, 2013).

Contemporary Art within Art Education

CA as mentioned, tends to be socially astute, controversial and conceptual. On the other hand, school art is usually more conservative, arising out of familiar materials, and routines (Jeffers and Parth, 1996). According to Efland (1976), school art is, a “form of art that is produced in the school by children under the guidance and influence of a teacher” (p. 37).

Tarr (1989) explains that the aim of art education, starting from the 18th Century has been to tame children and to teach them manual skills to be productive, obedient workers for the industry and to make products that would be both attractive to adults and of value within the marketplace.

If the function of school in society is to teach respect and obedience to authority, therein lays one of the inherent conflicts between CA and school art. One represents the new, untested, risk-taking unapologetic world-view that is at its core controversial and subversive and on the other hand there is school art that aims to instill docility and respect to authority through supplying a compliant manual workforce.

Adams (2013) lamented that, “creative practices in education are “neo-liberalized” in two ways principally: either they are assimilated into a market ethos, or they are driven out of the curriculum altogether” (p. 242). In order for art to regain importance and relevance in the 21st century, art education should look to the real needs of the world today.

Curriculum. Much of the current thinking about art curriculums advocate that it be relevant to the lives of the student and their communities and grounded in the realities of contemporary life as well as that of the school (Gude, 2013). It should equip the child with the analytical tools necessary so they can explore and form their own responses within the complex visual world around them (Knight, 2010).

When curriculum focuses on the students’ everyday lives, involving them in the planning, teaching and evaluation process, connecting to larger social issues that facilitate the development of an ethic of care, positive transformation in the students and the community in which they live can take place (Darts, 2006).

Room 13 is a prime example of a curriculum with CA practices at its core. It is an art studio in a primary school in Scotland that is fully run by 6-11 year old students. These children raise their own funds, apply for funding from the government, purchase their own materials, peer-tutor and form their own censorship committee to decide on which artists to invite as artist-in-residence. This enabled the children to learn from collaborating with each other and with other artists, have critical discourse, and develop intellectual autonomy (Page et al, 2009). This underscores the argument that traditional skills-based instruction in the studio limits the complexity, independent learning, pupil autonomy and the promotion of new learning methods that is present in CA production (Kotin et al, 2013, Page et al, 2009, Adams, 2010).

The issue-based nature of CA also offers cross curricula opportunities across a range of subjects (Page et al., 2006) including but not limited to science, literature, languages, social studies, mathematics and performing arts. Subjects such as citizenship, patriotic education and ethics are part and parcel of most art discussions (Kemperl (2013). Such discussions enable students to express their ideas and interpretations and offer multiple opinions and encourage applicability to real life situations (Hickman & Kiss, 2010).

Assessment. Assessment criteria have long been a hotly contested topic in visual arts education due to issues such as originality, creativity and subjectivity. In the current conventional modes of assessment, the emphasis on the end product rather than the journey of process discourages creativity and experimentation. If teachers teach in order to achieve very specific goals, students in order to please and receive validation will try to conform to the criteria, rules and goals given. Those who do not, are not able to or refuse to conform will be penalized and labeled difficult or unintelligent. As Robinson (2007) aptly suggested, “if you're not prepared to be wrong, you'll never come up with anything original...And by the time they get to be adults, most kids have lost that capacity. They have become frightened of being wrong” (5:37).

There are definite inherent cultural biases that are not accounted for in the assessment of art assignments (Atkinson, 2011). Lindstrom (2006) suggested that art assessment must take into consideration the ambiguous and unpredictable outcomes in Contemporary artworks. Assessments will thus include complex procedures of interviews and dialogue. Gude (2013) suggests that we look beyond product-based assessment frameworks and start articulating project-based assessment models that provide students with tools to make meaning in their own art work.

Literature from research done in the European Union, United Kingdom and North America on art assessments seem to indicate a trend toward formative assessments and an advocacy to place less emphasis on summative assessments (Hickman, 2007). Assessments should be part of the artistic process and serve to help students to recognize their own achievements, enable reflection, clarify teachers' aims, cover the syllabus, support students' development, document students' progress, and provide criteria to support professional judgements (Hickman, 2007).

Teacher

If art has taken such a radical shift in the last decade, the role of the teacher must also change according to the requirements of the newly configured subject.

Teachers play an influential role in the classroom, they can either promote or stifle student's creativity and meaningful expressions (Gude, 2013). Besides being traditionally trained and highly qualified (Brewer, 2011) and having confidence in being an active researcher/artist (Adams, 2010), art teachers should also become models for creative behavior. Engaging students with creative teaching which comes with an understanding of social conditions and forms of student production (Freedman, 2010). The culture of the classroom should be one of collaborative learning especially when working with new and

contemporary material (Dear, 2001), as students need to challenge mimetic technical achievement and shift away from outcome based production and allow ideas and discussion to fuel their work (Kirlew, 2011).

They will also need to be excellent facilitators in order to foster dialogue and reflective analysis (Charman & Ross, 2006). They have to be careful about artwork selection in order to facilitate positive learning experiences especially with challenging works of art (Villeneuve & Erickson, 2008) and protect the children from harm when it comes to censoring works that might be too violent or offensive for that age group (Emery, 2002). Cox (2000) believes that employing tactics such as questioning, engaging in dialogue, encouraging multiple readings, valuing a range of interpretations and asking for further explanations, helps the child to understand the artwork on a deeper level and to think meta-cognitively, challenging their own preconceptions of art and to think about how they think about art. Teachers should keep an open mind, embrace ambiguity and welcome multiple and shifting interpretations of artworks (Watts, 2011).

When faced with controversial or censorship issues, teachers should use this opportunity and take an inquiry-oriented pedagogical stance so students are challenged to confront and inquire into issues (Jeffers & Parth, 1996) instead of shying away from it. As the art room is a safe place where the world can be experienced 'virtually' (Emery, 2002), students can deal with, think through and work out issues that they will otherwise have to confront on their own with no adult guidance. Teachers will then have to be aware and be prepared for such occurrences and provide a supportive environment that is culturally relevant to the children (Herne, 2005).

Teacher-Student Power Relations. CA practices has always been synonymous with challenging authority and established ideologies and institutions. The nature of CA to interrogate identity and engage in social critique when carried over to education can radically shift the old conception of learner and teacher identities (Page et al, 2009). Within modern educational institutions, Ivashkevich (2012) explains, children are portrayed as lacking in knowledge, immature and disorderly. As such, teachers are in school to fill the child with knowledge and train them to be more mature and orderly. This produces a hierarchical power structure that puts children in a lacking or deficit model which limits the possibility of a learning community where ideas can be shared and knowledge can be co-generated. On the other hand, there are those who view the child as powerful, strong and competent in their own right and thus are not seen as subordinate to the adult, but are equal participant, thinker and communicator which allows the child to respond and deal with the world and their own issues using their own tactics thereby empowering them (Roberts, 2008, Ivashkevich, 2012, Adams, 2013). If they are provided with the necessary lens to interpret art and visual culture, they have the power to be self-informed (Knight, 2010).

Student

This section on student learning is categorized according to UNESCO's four pillars of learning which are essential principles for reshaping education:

- 1) Learning to know: to provide the cognitive tools required to better comprehend the world and its complexities, and to provide an appropriate and adequate foundation for future learning.
- 2) Learning to do: to provide the skills that would enable individuals to effectively participate in the global economy and society.
- 3) Learning to be: to provide self analytical and social skills to enable individuals to develop to their fullest potential psycho-socially, affectively as well as physically, for a all-round complete person.
- 4) Learning to live together: to expose individuals to the values implicit within human rights, democratic principles, intercultural understanding and respect and peace at all levels of society and human relationships to enable individuals and societies to live in peace and harmony (<http://unesco.org>)

Learning to Know. Through the various research studies of introducing CA in the classroom, results have shown that students developed not only art making skills, but also thinking skills and metacognitive skills. As observed by Herne (2005), students who participated in a CA making workshop gained visual literacy skills and started to understand how images are constructed and communicated within shared popular culture conventions. This will also help students understand how visual imagery impact contemporary society and how through them, historical events and shared experiences mold our identities (Yang & Suchan, 2009). Cox (2000) saw that when students are engaged in the idea that meanings of artworks are not fixed, they are willing to construct meaning for themselves. This pluralistic way of approaching art can potentially lead them to a form of critical enquiry which defies closure and enables a child to progressively think deeper as they attain greater understanding and more knowledge. According to Charman and Ross (2006), rather than relying on the traditional method of understanding an artwork through the transmission of knowledge from teacher to student, emphasis given to multiple interpretations of the artwork created by the viewer give students confidence in their own abilities of visual literacy.

Learning to Do. Downing (2005) found, with his interview of teachers who included CA practices in schools, that it has enhanced art learning in art form skills and knowledge, and have broadened students' understanding of what art is and can be. Above and beyond these hands-on skills, they were able to generate ideas when combining image and text, communication and presentation skills while sharing about their work. Their vocabulary also improved while explaining their own works and evaluating the works of others (Herne, 2005). Children also develop an understanding that artmaking goes beyond capturing appearance, they are interested in capturing meaning and how these can be powerful tools of communication (Dear, 2001).

Learning to Be. Attitude plays a large role in a students' learning journey. Motivation according to Dear (2001) can be shared in ways that ability cannot. Innovative ways of working also require students to be respectful and accepting of others works rather than reject it while still maintaining the attitude of questioning and criticality, as debate and discussion remains a prominent role in the learning process (Page et al, 2009).

Through the CA project, Herne (2015) explains, students were able to construct their own identities and verbalize them to their peers and teachers. In this process they not only got to know their friends better, they were able to articulate their opinions and in so doing, recognize their own worth. This helps them develop a strong self-esteem and confidence, increases their capacity to be respectful of others and ultimately prepares them to be active citizens. Activities in the art classroom should promote that right and foster the inclusion of children's point of view and creative solutions that are relevant to their lives (Rusanen et al., 2011). CA can offer many liberties to children (Dear, 2001) from their choice of material, to issues they want to address and perspectives on interpretations of the artworks' meanings that addresses their concerns.

Learning to Live Together. Due to the plurality of CA that offers diverse interpretations, it encourages tolerance and respect, dispositions that are imperative to successful collaborations. According to Thulson (2013), collaborative art making can involve conflict, compromise and synthesizing ideas. It also teaches students that as a collective they can have more ideas and achieve works on a grander scale. In Room 13, members collaborated through the sharing of ideas, teaching the group, enter into critical discourse through responding, analyzing and reflecting on each other's work, and welcome other ideas and concepts (Adams, 2005). Point to note, collaboration was not forced on them, it was a conscious choice made on the part of the artist/student where they felt comfortable in making that decision, where they are not assessed on their collaborative skills.

Rusanen et al. (2011) reflected on the practices of art education as cultural education concluded that there are many definitions of culture, one of which includes the ways we live in our communities and societies. In the recent European compulsory curricula, arts and cultural education are combined. As such, promoting art is equivalent to promoting cultural heritage and diversity. There has been an emphasis for art educators to organize art activities that enable the social and cultural participation of children. Governments are starting to realize the importance of arts education to the health and well-being of a community (Freedman, 2010).

Challenges

CA can appear ideal to art teaching and learning, however, the literature reveals that there can be a number of challenges when introducing CA to the curriculum. Atkinson (2011) warned that employing CA practices in school does not only affect the art curriculum, it can also challenge the whole school's approach to teaching and learning. It challenges orthodox curriculums, pedagogy, learning outcomes, assumptions about art being an assessable product, and all the fundamentals of assessments itself. Therefore, it can be a

huge risk and dilemma that schools can face (Adams, 2010).

In our enthusiasm to embrace the new, there is another potential pitfall. According to Stinespring (2001) we might fall into the trap that CA is against all tradition and everything that comes with it, including craftsmanship, design and quality. The threat that we might abandon aesthetics and ‘serious art of high quality’ altogether just so we can fit into the look of CA is very real as many artworks today are selected for their socio-political messages and not their aesthetic value (Kamhi, 2003). According to Eisner (1994), “Since the social and cultural agenda is so fundamental...one wonders whether in the end art education [may] become little more than a handmaiden to the social studies” (Pg. 190).

Thulson (2013) explains that art educators give reasons such as young children cannot understand the complex theories in the 21st century and that children should have basic art-making skills before they can make CA. The real fear might stem from their unfamiliarity with the materials used in CA production (Jeffers and Parth, 1996) and/or the offensive, disturbing and provocative content that is prevalent in CA. “While wishing to be open-minded and to teach inclusive curricula, art teachers are also aware of their accountability in the community and their responsibility for the well-being of their students” (Emery, 2002, p. 5). Since CA touches on multiple issues and can be interpreted in numerous perspectives, teachers may have anxieties about their own ability to facilitate conversations in subjects that they are not familiar with. As teachers who were unprepared were less willing to guide students through discussions of controversial issues or defend the use of sensitive materials in their lessons (Jeffers and Parth, 1996), teachers need to be aware that rigorous planning and preparation is key to a successful CA lesson (Page et al, 2009).

Conclusion and Directions for Further Research

The literature seems to indicate that engaging in CA practices in school promotes critical thinking and creativity rather than merely skill based rote learning. It also encourages learner engagement, self-directed learning and exploration, freedom of expression, empathy, risk taking in art making, as well as a broader and deeper understanding in art. CA pedagogies fosters higher-order thinking skills by increasing students’ opportunities to analyze and evaluate art through critical discussion. These multifaceted modes of learning are powerful tools that can give voice to children and youth and suggest the significance of including CA practices in the school curriculum.

This literature review has also revealed significant gaps in research on CA practices in schools such as, 1) Assessment Models and tools for CA assignments and projects, 2) the School’s Role in accommodating and supporting CA practices, 3) the Parent’s Role to further support student agency, 4) knowledge about Student Challenges in learning about CA and 5) Professional Development of Art Teachers in teaching/making/researching CA.

Assessment Models. Assessment models in CA are not confined to grading student artwork. It also includes analyzing and discussing the artworks, which is not just the domain of the teacher, but also that of fellow students. Teachers will have to learn the skills to be a facilitator in these art discussions.

School's Role. Support from school management is imperative for change in the whole school approach towards CA practices. In many instances, the art teacher's professionalism is assessed by the school management based on the quality of student art exhibitions. This often pressures them into creating 'product based' art exhibitions not for the benefit of the student but for fulfilling the expectations of school management and parents regardless of the relevance of these expectations to learning. This can result in the child's work being 'touched up' by an adult which has implications in issues of academic honesty later on in the child's life. The resulting artworks although seemingly technically advanced and of a certain aesthetic standard are often creatively bankrupt and often lack the child's voice. In the long run, this form of prescriptive art education may be damaging to the creative, experimental and artistic development of the child.

"The accountability culture is pervasive, undermines trust in teacher professionalism and encourages a sense that there should be a tangible product or outcome from educational endeavour." (Hall, Thomson, and Russell 2007, p.615). The lack of understanding of the value of art and arts education by the school and its administrators is an issue that teachers should be cognizant of in order to facilitate dialogues for awareness.

Parent's Role. Parents are one of the stakeholders within art education that is seldom discussed in this area of research. What role do the parents play other than coming to school and looking at their children's artwork? They can support the landscape of art education if they had the opportunity to attend workshops and seminars by expertly trained art teachers on the benefits of CA instead of just monitoring their children's artistic progress as an outsider. This will shift the paradigm of old school art displays to more meaningful artistic practices that are relevant to their children's lives.

Student Challenges. There is not much literature on the challenges that students face while engaging in CA learning and practice. Teacher PD can encourage teachers to think deeper about how to engage students and to address the power relations or challenges faced between students when they engage in collaborative activities. This can be a topic of discussion during teacher PD so educators can better pinpoint these issues and assist students in their learning.

Professional Development of Art Teachers. There is a general lack of research for effective PD models for teaching CA in schools. Topics such as teachers' self-efficacy as artist/educator/researcher, programmes for content upgrade including learning from local Contemporary artist/educators and museums, facilitating art discussions, dealing with controversial subjects, formative assessments models and tools, enhancing studio resources, curriculum and lesson plan application in schools can all contribute to effective PD.

PD of art teachers in teaching/making/researching CA should be looked into so teachers are equipped with a deeper understanding of CA practices, pedagogies and approaches that are supportive of student learning. PD topics can include suitable assessment strategies for CA assignments and projects so that it is a less restrictive grading system and more sympathetic to creative endeavours. In my opinion, teachers are not only facilitators of learning in the classroom, they should also be considered experts in their field whom the school management and parents can turn to for advice on specific developmental needs. Therefore, PD should inform teachers of ways to engage parents and school management in supporting CA practices, and how to negotiate issues of autonomy over the school's art curriculum. Teacher PD should also discuss challenges students might face in learning about CA so they can better support student's learning and shed light on learner engagement issues.

This review has surfaced research gaps that are fundamental to my research study on Teacher PD towards CA practices.

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