

## Kia Ora Koutou

### Welcome to the 19th issue of ecARTnz

This is a special issue for student teachers.

The article in this issue is by academics and practitioners (Lisa Terreni, Kathy Danko McGhee, Rachel Denee, Gai Lindsay, Michelle Johnston, Margaret Brooks, Catherine Lee, Lesley Pohio, Janette Kelly-Ware and Rosemary Richards) who discuss their views on colouring-in books, templates and worksheets.

We hope this will provoke you to think carefully about your own practice.

Lisa Terreni  
Editor



## Thinking outside the lines: Colouring-in books, templates and worksheets

by Lisa Terreni  
with  
Kathy Danko McGhee,  
Rachel Denee,  
Gai Lindsay,  
Michelle Johnston,  
Margaret Brooks,  
Catherine Lee,  
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# Thinking outside the lines: Colouring-in books, templates and worksheets

Lisa Terreni with Kathy Danko McGhee, Rachel Denee, Gai Lindsay, Michelle Johnston, Margaret Brooks, Catherine Lee, Lesley Pohio, Janette Kelly-Ware and Rosemary Richards

## Background

Recently, a friend of mine who is teaching in Vietnam asked if I could recommend a suitable article she could share with her early childhood education (ECE) colleagues about why they shouldn't offer colouring-in sheets to children as part of their programme. She also asked me what I think about them. At the time, my thoughts about it seemed straight forward and I gave my unequivocal response ... "No way!"

From having been an early childhood teacher for many years, a professional development provider and an academic who has undertaken considerable research in arts education, I am convinced that fundamental to quality education for young children attending early childhood services is the provision of rich learning opportunities in the arts. Skilled teachers are those who support children's use of multiple literacies so they can develop their own unique working theories about the world they live in. In particular, visual art gives children another voice for expressing their ideas, understandings (and sometimes their concerns) about the people, places, events and things that are important to them in their lives.

Young children are in the process of mastering language (sometimes more than one) and their ability to express themselves verbally is sometimes still developing. Hence, the arts can help to make their thinking visible to the children and adults they work with. One of the most significant memories I have as a kindergarten teacher was watching a young child doing a painting. She started by painting people on her paper; a big one and a little one. And then I watched her do the thing that children so often do with their paintings ... she got a big brush full of paint and covered the whole thing in a circular green blob, completely covering her original figures. Because I had been watching the process so intently I was rather frustrated that she had done this, so I asked her why she had. She replied "Lisa, the little girl is hiding under a leaf...she's scared of her mummy!" Needless to say this was a very significant moment - a huge realisation for me about the power of art for young children (as well as the importance of being an attentive teacher in this domain).

Nonetheless, I confessed to my friend in Vietnam that I hadn't seen any literature about the topic since my own teaching days, but recalled that on recent visits to assess students doing their teaching experience in ECE centres I had observed colouring-in sheets and templates being used in a number of centres. Consequently, my interest in the topic has been reignited. In the process of researching and thinking about the appropriateness of the provision of colouring-in sheets in an ECE context by looking for current literature and online resources, I canvassed the opinions of highly regarded early childhood education art specialists and teachers who I am connected with locally and internationally.



## The debate

There are several commentaries about colouring-in sheets online, with various people presenting debates that argue against it as 'good practice'. Perhaps this one gets close to the heart of the matter for me - <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2016/07/02/478396922/the-people-vs-coloring-books-the-verdict-is-in>. Even though many of us have fond memories of colouring-in books as children at home (my granny would pop one under my pillow when I stayed the night and I would wake up to find this little treat) there are many parents who don't support the idea – see for instance <https://artfulparent.com/why-i-dont-buy-coloring-books-for-my-kids/>

Nonetheless, parents often buy colouring-in books for their children. Rachel Denee, a PhD student, owner and teacher at Daisies Early Learning Centre, and parent of young children says:

As a parent, I have given my children colouring-in books at times...[but] I know that my children get plenty of opportunities at home for open-ended art making with quality materials and lots of time, space and conversation, so if I choose to give them a colouring book for, say, a long plane trip, I know it's balanced out by their usual art experiences.

Rachel is very clear, however, that what busy parents provide for their children's enjoyment at home is an entirely different matter to what early childhood teachers should be doing:

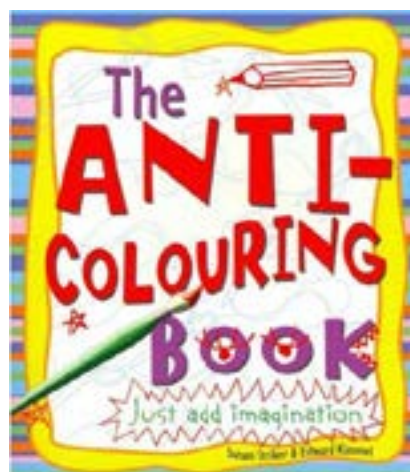
I don't want my children to be handed colouring-in sheets at kindergarten or school because I think it's lazy teaching. From my dual parent/teacher perspective ... professional teachers have different obligations than busy parents, and just because something is fine to use at home it isn't necessarily appropriate in an education setting.

Michelle Johnston, owner and supervisor at St Andrews Epsom Early Learning Centre in Auckland also has a strong views about colouring-in books having no place at her centre. She feels that they don't support or encourage children's creativity. "To me" she says, "it's a mindless exercise that a child could do without any thought processes involved". As Millie's drawing of the dog below illustrates, children have to put their own ideas into a drawing rather than rely on someone else's..making a much more complex art work.



Margaret Brooks, an artist and academic at the University of New England (Armidale, Australia) reminded me that in the 1990's American art educator Susan Striker (see <https://www.aflct.org/artists/artists-profile/susan-striker.html> ) wrote the first of an ongoing series – The Anti-Colouring-in Book, which was very popular with parents at the time of publication. I was introduced to this series by a kindergarten parent. Now in its fourth edition, the books still sell well and Striker has gone on to produce The Anti-Coloring Book App for iPad and mini iPad

For a demonstration see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bUkRuce7RiE>





The recent phenomenon of colouring-in books published for adults surprises me. Often sold as a way for adults to de-stress and have a soothing experience, there are 100s of different titles available online and in book shops. These range from conventional colouring-in books to those that have somewhat more bizarre subject matter (see, for instance <https://www.mightyape.co.nz/authors/swear-word-coloring-book/all>).

However, Gai Lindsay, an artist and academic at the University of Wollongong (New South Wales, Australia), discovered a poignant use of colouring-in sheets during her PhD data gathering in an ECE centre. She observed

In one of my participant ECE services the teachers consciously included mandala colouring-in sheets for a child who did these with his bi-polar mum. Therefore it was a familiar and calming process for him...they felt that acceptance and inclusion of that reality for the child was far more productive than a hard-line approach to all colouring-in.

Gai's example highlights the need for teachers to be mindful of the individual needs of young children, and to deal with these sensitively as was done in this case. However, Gai notes that "if stereotyped images and structured processes are all that children are offered in terms of art languages, then children's 'voice' is restricted to the choices of social culture made for them by others and the images of culture that devalue their drawing and meaning making". Nonetheless, Gai refrains from condemning colouring-in to a lesser art status believing that "colouring-in can be a legitimate technique...it is a question of what to colour-in".

So what should children be able to colour in? Catherine Lee, director, supervisor and teacher at Point Preschool in Sydney Australia, answers this question succinctly, stating :

Do the children I teach colour-in? Yes they do. They draw their own pictures and colour them in. Sometimes other children draw pictures for them and they colour them in. But at preschool, we do not provide commercially produced pictures which are often dumbed down for children, stereotypical and culturally inappropriate, and produced by adults. Maybe they do at home, but this is not part of our arts practice.

Kathy Danko-McGhee, an artist and academic working at the University of Saint Francis in the USA as Program Director of Art Education & Pre-Art Therapy, has written extensively about art education (see for example: *The Impact of Early Art Experiences on Literacy Development*, Danko McGhee & Slutsky, 2007). She argues that colouring-in books might actually hinder children's positive feelings about their own art, stating:

Children's art helps adults see that children understand the world, but more importantly how they understand it. The symbols children use to represent their understanding become increasingly complex, illustrating the child's ability to think in more abstract ways. This complexity and attention to detail in their art-making also increases as children have more opportunities to explore various art media.

Giving children a colouring book does not afford the child any of these opportunities for an enriching and quality learning experience. When a pre-drawn image is offered to a child to colour in, it puts into motion a feeling of doubt that their own drawings are not good enough. This effects their artistic self-esteem. Pre-drawn images in colouring books are often of poor quality and include stereotypes which can be perpetuated.



*Plants in the garden*



## Thinking about theory and practice: The New Zealand context

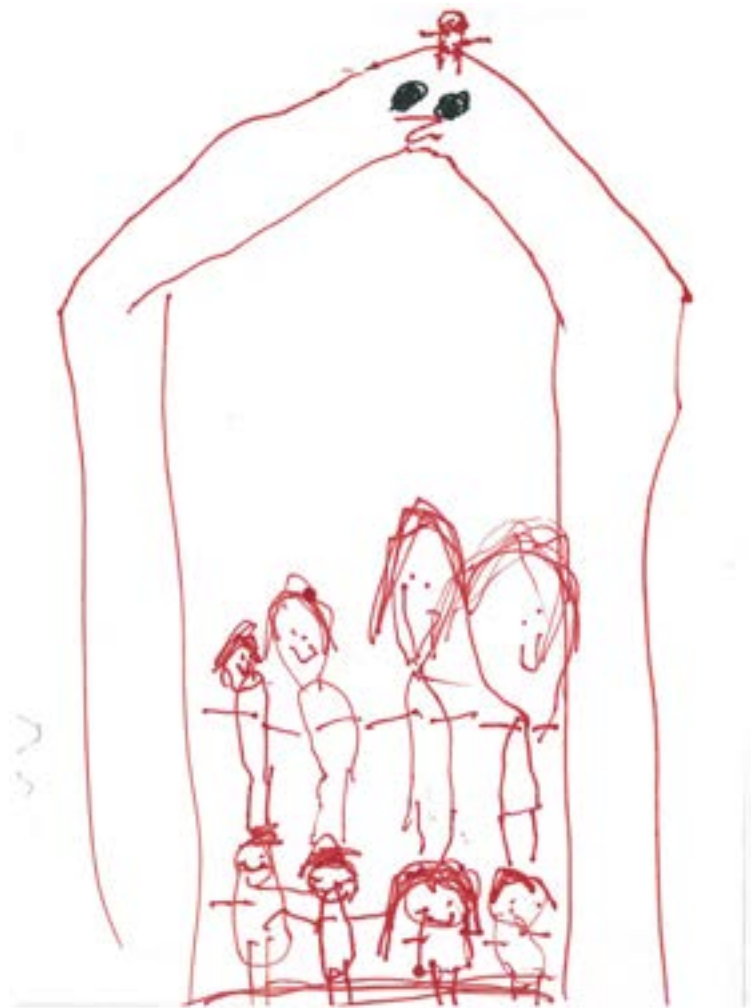
While it is important to listen to the voices of experienced academics and teachers it is also important to remember current learning theories about early childhood education embedded in various curriculum documents. These learning theories can impact on what constitutes the provision of 'quality' art experiences for young children. Lesley Pohio, a former lecturer at the University of Auckland and a trustee of REANZ (Reggio Emilia Aotearoa New Zealand), believes that:

The debate re worksheets should be grounded within a deeper pedagogical discussion ... I'm astounded that this antiquated debate continues, and it tells me that these teachers [those that use colouring-in sheets] probably haven't moved beyond their own experiences of the arts and they haven't taken any notice of their tertiary courses or *Te Whāriki* [the New Zealand early childhood curriculum document] for that matter. *Te Whāriki* takes the position of experiences creating opportunities for children to explore identity etc and through these experiences understand the complexities and nuances of the materials they use and the languages these materials speak.

The recently revised *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) recognises the role of the arts as important 'languages' for children (see p. 41), which need to be included in an ECE programme. It emphasises a socio-cultural (also known as cultural historical) perspective based on Vygotsky's ideas that "learning leads development and occurs in relationships with people, places and things, mediated by participation in valued social and cultural activities" (p.61). So whilst the document is a curriculum framework open to interpretation depending on the cultural context of the centre (one of the intentions of the curriculum), there are strong messages within the document about teachers being "able to integrate domain knowledge (for example, science and arts knowledge) into the curriculum" (p.59).

One of the key features of the document, and one that it is famous for, is the idea that teachers need to have in their minds an image of children as competent learners who are able to make decisions about their own learning processes, and who need to be supported by teachers to become confident communicators of their ideas. The provision of colouring-in sheets, as Lesley suggests flies in the face of this aspiration. She says:

When I see pre-drawn ideas/pictures presented to children I think about what view/image of children do these teachers hold of children that they consider this type of resource is of value? To me it represents a dumbing down and deficit view that children aren't capable of designing their own images ... If we are promoting the idea that children are representing their ideas and thinking through their engagement with materials, then how do these pre-drawn outlines reflect their individual and unique thinking and experiences as they search for meaning?



*A child's complex drawing after visiting a local marae (Māori meeting house).*

## If colouring-in books are a problem, what's the solution?

It is likely that if teachers do not have clear ideas about the provision of quality good art education learning experiences then it's probable that colouring-in sheets could become an accepted norm. Rachel Denee believes that a proactive approach could be useful, saying:

It might be useful to focus on alternative teaching strategies to colouring-in sheets. If we want teachers to stop using an easy tool, we need to offer accessible alternatives: ways to set up simple quality resources, sentence starters for talking to children about their work, suggestions of diverse artists to look at for inspiration, and strong encouragement for teachers to actually spend time alongside children in the art area.

It is relevant to note here that other issues of ecARTnz have many examples of excellent teacher practice that are helpful exemplars for good practice (see <http://artinearlychildhood.org/ecartnz/>). These examples illustrate Kathy Danko-McGhee's suggestion that "the more the child does on their OWN, the BETTER the learning experience".

Another issue identified by researchers and scholars is the lack of professional development for teachers. I am of the opinion that, due to the government's sole emphasis on literacy and numeracy over the last decade in New Zealand, a lack of good art education professional development for teachers has led to "the near death of the arts" in schools ( see <https://www.newsroom.co.nz/@ideasroom/2020/01/21/994613/arts-leaders-hope-to-end-near-death-of-arts-in-schools>) and proven costly to quality arts education in EC services.

Gai Lindsay observes "I agree that the reason many educators resort to (and defend) colouring-in sheets often stems from their own void of arts skills and knowledge. My PhD highlighted that for sure – which is what I am now trying to challenge and to build self-efficacy and visual arts pedagogical content knowledge....when people know better and believe they can – then children will experience higher quality (Big E) Experiences!" The types of tools that Rachel has suggested above that might be useful for teachers could be the very things that are provided in good professional learning and development programmes that develop teachers pedagogical content knowledge and personal efficacy.



## Final thoughts

My discussions with teachers and academics for this article have conclusively demonstrated there is no place for the regular use of colouring-in sheets in quality visual art education programmes for young children in ECE contexts. Colouring-in sheets can marginalise children's ideas. We agree that by extending children's creative processes through the provision of rich arts learning experiences (see ecARTnz for inspirational examples) they will be more likely to be able to express their thinking processes and working theories, their ideas and fears, and even their aspirations for the future. Teachers can, and need to be, important guides in this process.

There are many more issues that need discussing in relation to quality arts provision. In our discussion about colouring-in sheets Rosemary Richards, an academic at Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology (Rotorua), pointed to the need for a debate about 'copying' as a legitimate way for children to co-construct knowledge, and the use of stencils in some forms of art-making. Whilst Kathy Danko McGhee and Rachel Denee raised the issue of what constitutes cultural appropriation in arts education. I feel strongly that we need to keep talking about the use of food in art programmes. Finally, Gai Lindsay argues that there is confusion about the word 'craft' and the place crafting has in an ECE programme that needs discussion. These important topics will be covered in further issues of ecARTnz.

## Recommended reading

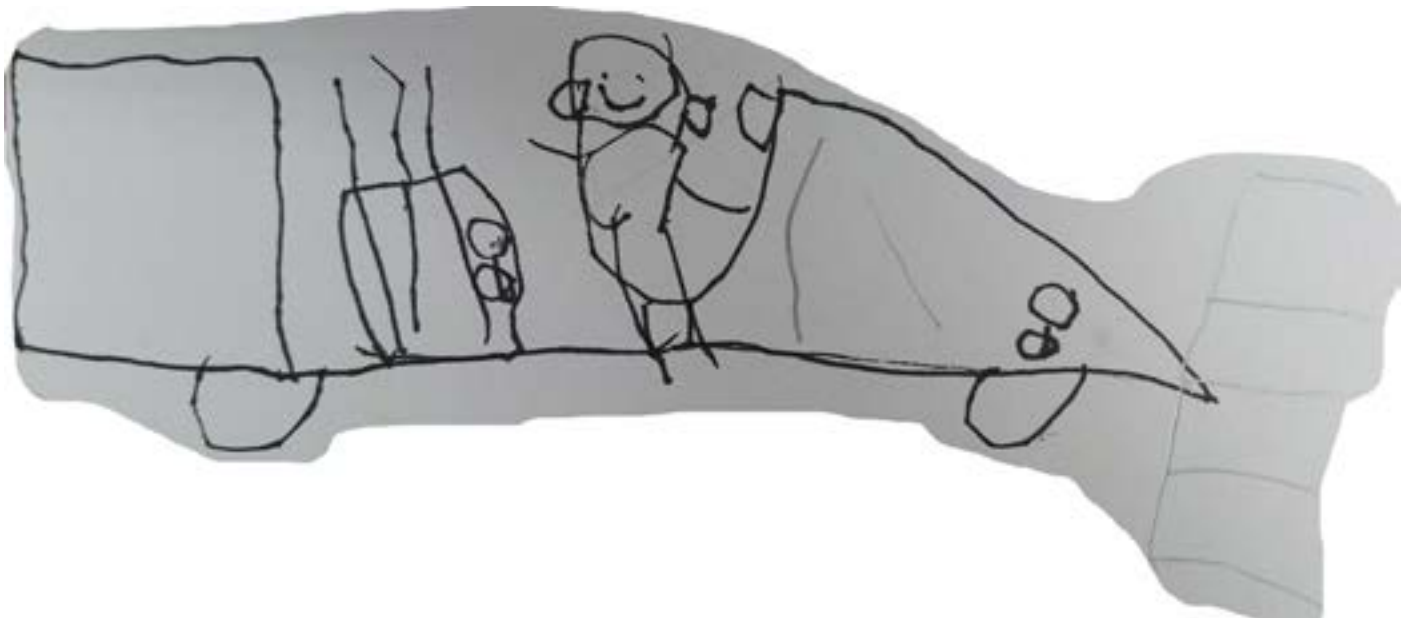
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Terreni, L. (2016). Visual arts education for young children In Aotearoa New Zealand. *Journal of Childhood Studies*, 41 (4), 50-59. Retrieved from <https://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/jcs/issue/view/1222>



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Margaret Brooks – see <https://www.une.edu.au/staff-profiles/education/mbrooks3>

Gai Lindsay – see [https://scholars.uow.edu.au/display/gai\\_lindsay](https://scholars.uow.edu.au/display/gai_lindsay)

Rachel Denee – see <https://www.daisies.co.nz/introduction>

Catherine Morgan – see <https://thepointpreschool.com.au/about/>

Lesley Pohio – see <https://www.reanz.org/about1/trustees/>

Rosemary Richards – [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Rosemary\\_Richards3](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Rosemary_Richards3)

Michelle Johnston – see <https://standrewsepsom.co.nz/who-we-are-2/>

Kathy Danko-McGhee - see <http://www.firstencounters4babies.com/about-the-owner.html>

Janette Kelly-Ware - see <https://www.waikato.ac.nz/staff-profiles/people/kellyj>





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## **Contact details**

### **Editorial Board information**

ecARTnz, an emagazine of professional practice for early childhood educators, is a quarterly publication developed to generate new interest in visual art education in Aotearoa New Zealand. The intention of the editorial board is that ecARTnz will showcase examples of teaching and learning, literature, and conferences of interest to educators in early childhood education.

Members of the editorial board are: Lisa Terreni and Mary Jane Shuker (VUW), Janette Kelly and Helen Aitkin (UoW), Rosemary Richards (Toi Ohomai) and Lesley Pohio (REANZ).

The board is responsible for promoting the magazine, writing, reviewing and editing contributions, and ensuring that the emagazine is of a consistently high standard. The views in this journal do not necessarily reflect those of the editorial board members.

Contributions are invited for the next issue of ecARTnz. Submissions of 1000-2000 words accompanied by up to 8 photographs sent as .jpgs are welcomed.

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