The Implications of 'Literacy' Acquisition for Students from Low Socioeconomic Communities Transitioning from Secondary Schools to Tertiary Art / Design Institutions in New Zealand

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Abstract

This article provides insights into aspects of a larger qualitative study that investigated

'literacy' acquisition in art education, particularly for Māori and Pacific Island students from

low-decile secondary schools in low socioeconomic communities transitioning to tertiary art / design study. The research was located in New Zealand where national curriculum and assessment systems for secondary schools, and tertiary education strategies, emphasize literacy acquisition. The research was contextualized within the impact of socioeconomic, cultural, political and educational factors on students' learning. It was underpinned by literacy models for the arts and informed by culturally inclusive pedagogies. Data were sought from secondary school art teachers in low-decile schools, tertiary art / design lecturers in first year programs and first year tertiary students. Presented through participants' 'voices' and examples of students' artworks, the findings reveal a complex range of insights, beliefs and strategies about literacy acquisition as a potential pathway to success. The conclusions point to secondary schools and tertiary art / design schools needing to address the challenges faced by students, particularly Māori and Pacific Island, who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds, attend low-decile schools, are often first in their family to transition to tertiary education, and lack preparedness for research-led and critically-centered study.

Introduction

This article draws on research in two secondary schools and a tertiary art / design institution in New Zealand. The research focused on seeking answers to what forms of 'literacies' in senior secondary school art programs support students, particularly Māori and Pacific Island, who attend low-decile schools in low socioeconomic status (SES) communities, to achieve success when they transition to tertiary art / design courses. It also sought answers to how these students, who are often first in their family to attend tertiary institutions, are supported to acquire the range of 'literacies' required for art / design study during their first year.

Positioned in a qualitative interpretative paradigm, the research was contextualized within socioeconomic, cultural, political, and educational factors that affect learning and achievement for students from low SES communities. It was underpinned by requirements of New Zealand's national curriculum and tertiary education strategies that emphasize literacy acquisition. The findings, presented through a sample of participants' 'voices' and examples of students' artworks, reveal a complex range of insights, beliefs and strategies about literacy acquisition as a potential pathway to success. They point to a disconnection between secondary schools and tertiary institutions, and the need to address challenges faced by Māori and Pacific Island students transitioning from secondary schools to first year tertiary art/design programs, including preparedness for research-led and critically-centered study.

The Research Design

The research was conducted by Steve Lovett who taught for 22 years at a tertiary art / design institution in a low SES community. It was motivated by his struggles with literacy acquisition as a young person and how he overcame that with support. During postgraduate study, Lovett's concerns about literacy acquisition by students from low-decile schools came to the fore. Jill Smith, an experienced tertiary art teacher educator and researcher, introduced him to theories concerning the formation of literacies and critical thinking, culturally inclusive pedagogical perspectives, and art education for ethnically diverse students. Lovett was inspired by the idea that art education research can be conceptualized, conducted and reported with images as data, not text alone. Smith was his supervisor for the Master of Education research reported here.

Aims of the research

There is an absence of research in New Zealand about students from low SES communities, including Māori and Pacific Island, transitioning from studying art in secondary schools to tertiary art / design schools. The aims of the research were to investigate how these year 12-13 students (16-18 year olds) who attend low-decile secondary schools in low SES communities develop various forms of literacies at school; whether literacy acquisition at school prepares them for tertiary study; and how they are supported in their first year of

tertiary study to achieve success through research-led and critically-centered forms of literacies.

The research questions

The overarching question was: "What forms of 'literacies' in year 12-13 secondary school art programs and first year tertiary art / design courses enhance success for students, including Māori and Pacific Island, who come from low-decile schools in low SES communities?"

Four sub-questions guided the research:

- How do education policies, national curriculum, and assessment modes articulate what literacy means for art education at year 12-13 in New Zealand secondary schools?

- What kinds of literacies are fostered in year 12-13 art courses by teachers at low-decile schools in low socioeconomic communities?

- How do national policies and programs at tertiary art/design schools articulate what literacy means?

- What forms of literacies are required in programs for tertiary art/design students in their first year of study?

The theoretical framework

The research was positioned within an interpretivist qualitative paradigm based on the nature of the research problem, its aims and questions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). It was underpinned by arts-based methodology for which there is burgeoning literature on the theoretical grounding for using the 'visual' as a potent tool in art education research (Leavy, 2015; Weber, 2008). Smith (2016, 2019) argues that images, including artworks by participants, are not mere additions to research but a vital means for learning about them and their art making processes.

Research settings and participants

Selection of participants and settings was based on the claim that purposive sampling is a significant feature that contributes to the quality of interpretations made by the researcher and underlying inferences in the findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Selection was also influenced by Lovett's experience of teaching at a tertiary art / design institution where year 12-13 students from low SES communities entered first year study in art and design.

The settings were two secondary schools and one art / design tertiary institution. Four secondary school art teachers, two from each of Schools A and B, are long serving practitioners, members of their communities, and aware of socioeconomic factors that shape students' lives. Three teachers are New Zealand European and one is Māori New Zealand

European. School A is a low-decile 1 co-educational school with 59% Māori students, 29% Pacific Island, 6% European, and 6% other ethnicities. Although School B is a mid-decile 7 co-educational school with 66% European students, 30% Māori, 2% Pacific Island and 2% other ethnicities, it has a significant cohort of students from low SES communities. With permission from their 16-18 year old students, examples of art works are included in the findings. At the tertiary art / design setting, referred to as Tertiary Institution 1, two art / design lecturers, both European, and two first year students, both Māori, participated. Albeit small in scale, the eight participants provided rich data through their words and art works.

Data collection methods

Data collection comprised analysis of curriculum and policy documents pertinent to secondary schools and the tertiary art/design institution, followed by individual semi-structured, 90-minute face-to-face interviews with the four art teachers, two tertiary lecturers and two first year students. Leavy (2015) describes interviews as knowledge-producing conversation where meaning making is co-created. Thus, personal accounts of the participants were combined with the researcher's interpretations. The third dataset were photographs of students' artworks.

Data analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step guide to thematic analysis was used to analyze data. The

aim was to determine patterns of meaning across the dataset that provided answers to the research questions, followed by generating codes to identify important features and ascertain key 'themes' that emerged to locate recurring features of participants' accounts, perceptions and experiences. Reviewing, altering and developing the themes ensured that data made sense and captured the 'essence' of each theme. The final step was analyzing key patterns and themes to provide answers to the questions. Photographic data of students' artworks enabled cross- checking between what the participants said and did to ensure authenticity and validity.

Background to the Research – Contextual Factors

The research was informed by literature pertinent to five contextual factors:

- **The impact of socioeconomic, cultural, and political factors on low SES students in New Zealand**

The term 'socioeconomic status' (SES) applies to interacting social and economic measures of employment, education, health, economic characteristics and social standing or class of an individual or group in society (American Psychological Association Socioeconomic Status Office, 2019). The term draws on theories of Max Weber (1864-1920) who used a three-part theoretical model to understand the operation of class concepts in society, from social standing and economic position; to class enacted through shared group characteristics and

goals that cohere around cultural identity, gender, sexuality, educational achievement, occupation or immigrant status; and to status and class as expressions of power, privilege and socioeconomic hierarchies (Waters & Waters, 2015).

Further compounding the positioning of SES communities in New Zealand are the effects of New Right political ideology in the 1980s and 1990s that shaped education, health and social outcomes. Johnson et al. (2018) contend that these determinants have direct consequences for educational outcomes, particularly on Pacific Island and Māori populations. This confluence of challenges makes educational achievement more complex for students from low-decile schools in low SES communities, including adverse consequences of truancy, residential transience, and leaving formal education earlier with lower levels of achievement (Dixon, 2018; Gerritson, 2018). The Ministry of Education (2015) admits that the system is less successful for Māori and Pacific Island students and people from low-income families. Milne (2013) is more critical, identifying cultural difference as operating as 'white streams' and 'whiteness' with the potential to distance Māori and Pacific Island students from education. Earlier, Freire (2000) described this space as 'the culture of silence', amounting to exclusion from pedagogical structures, curriculum delivery, and contributing to achievement disparities.

- **The implications of the 'decile rating' system on achievement and assessment of low SES students in secondary schools in New Zealand**

A key implication for students in low SES communities is the decile rating system, from 1-10, used in secondary schools. The New Zealand Government (2019) uses deciles to indicate the extent a school draws its students from low SES communities, and to target funding for state schools to help overcome barriers to learning that students might face. The lower the school's decile, the more funding it receives.

Hattie (2002) found in his analysis of New Zealand schools that decile calculations produce an "almost racist bias … that the index uses the percentage of Māori and Pacific Island students in a school as an index of lower decile" (p. 5). He contends that instead of achieving a measure of social justice in low SES communities it now 'concentrates' students in low-decile 1-3 schools. Johnson (2018) concurs that exclusion of the poor is epitomized by prohibitive property prices in 'top' school zones, in which high-decile 8-10 schools are located, and in 'white flight' of European students from low-decile schools.

- **The reality of educational achievement statistics for students from low SES communities**

The majority of New Zealand's population is of European descent (70%), with Māori the largest minority (16.5%) and Pacific peoples at 9% (Statistics New Zealand, 2019). Ministry of Education (2017) data that plots the history of students from low-decile secondary schools

notes that 92.3% of students from high-decile 9-10 schools remained at school until 17 years, 73.8% higher than for low-decile 1-2 schools. The proportion of Māori students remaining at school to age 17 was 69.6% and for Pacific Island students 81.6%. Data for university entrance show that Māori and Pacific Island students in decile 1-3 secondary schools attained university entrance at half the rate of those in decile 8-10 schools (NZQA, 2018).

- **The effects of national curriculum and assessment policies on visual arts education in secondary schools**

The New Zealand Curriculum (MoE, 2007) provides a framework to support all students, including those from low SES communities, studying art in secondary schools. The curriculum contains four open-ended 'strands': Understanding the Visual Arts in Context (UC), Developing Practical Knowledge (PK), Developing Ideas (DI), and Communicating and Interpreting (CI). A key feature is non-content specificity, enabling art teachers to determine curricula content and pedagogy most suited to their students. This means that focus can be on students' ethnic and cultural identities, interests, choice of media and processes, and individual ways of working. One exception is for all students to learn about the culture (tikanga) and language (te reo) of the indigenous Māori people during their secondary schooling.

Assessment of students' art making is measured through the *National Certificate of Educational Achievement* (NZQA, 2018), the main qualification for 16-18 year old secondary

school students in their final three years. NCEA provides flexible assessment choices for schools to select Achievement Standards from a suite of possibilities. Four of the five standards are internally assessed by art teachers, and a portfolio submission is externally verified by NZQA. In this standards-based system 'marks' are not given but levels of performance are awarded as Achieved, Merit, and Excellence, or Not Achieved. A key feature of the standards is emphasis on students studying 'established practice' appropriate to their chosen art discipline. This is interpreted by teachers as using 'artist models' to help students understand how artists' processes and artworks can inform the development and resolution of their own ideas and increase their fluency of techniques and materials.

- **The importance of culturally inclusive and responsive pedagogies for low SES students**

Theories of cultural reproduction advocated by Bourdieu (1973), that underpin concepts of cultural capital developed by students within the culture of teaching and learning, had a direct bearing on this research. Bourdieu asserts that individual's and families' cultural resources are a form of "inherited social capital" (p. 100), analogous and equal to their "economic resources" (p. 107). Bourdieu contends that cultural capital is also determined by the dominant cultural group who reproduce underlying cultural structures, values, and measures of attainment. The knowledge (cultural capital) that all students bring to learning should be

recognized, valued, and activated in pedagogical practices.

It is argued that for Māori students, art in secondary schools is a curricular space in which to express their agency in developing culturally responsive forms of knowledge (Milne, 2013). Bishop and Berryman (2010) argue for concepts of manaakitanga (care), mana motuhake (care for student achievement), ngā whakapiringatanga (a healthy learning environment) and wānanaga (discussion, deliberation, consideration). They believe these interwoven concepts are fundamental to teachers taking responsibility for engaging all learners. Stucki (2012) emphasizes a relationship-oriented pedagogy where "group work, teina/tuakana, ako, whanaungatanga, mihi, contribute to group success" (p. 12). These Māori values contrast with 'individual' achievement promoted in many higher decile schools, often driven by external examinations (Smith, 2019).

In the context of Pacific Island education Māhina (2010) emphasises, similar to Māori, relational ethics through concepts of tā-vā (tā being time and action and vā being space and content) with identity being connected to ancestors through genealogy and mythology. Mara and Marsters (2009) support relational pedagogy for learning success, indicating beneficial increases in confidence and achievement among mentored students, and the role of unspoken tacit knowledge in shaping learning experiences for low SES students.

Education policy which addresses more relevant pathways for low SES learners transitioning out of school to tertiary education or the workplace (MoE, 2016) was pertinent

to this research. This is expressed in *Kā Hikitia: Accelerating Success 2013–2017* (MoE, 2013):

> Teachers must make the learning process transparent and understandable for the students, with incremental steps in learning to be open to practice and revision, and providing opportunities to practice and requiring students to construct their own meaning of new information and ideas. (p. 17)

> Tomoana (2012) advocates for the relevance that tuakana-teina (mentor and junior)

pedagogical models have for Māori and Pacific Island students. He cites the benefits that

learners derive from understanding and incorporating more of their cultural and tacit

knowledge alongside the demands of a research driven epistemic delivery.

Background to the Research - Definitions of Literacy Education

Further literature that informed the research focused on definitions of 'literacy' and the

implications for low SES students transitioning from secondary schools to tertiary

institutions:

- **Definitions of literacy in the New Zealand curriculum**

In *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) it is stated that:

> In visual arts education, students develop visual literacy and aesthetic awareness as they manipulate and transform visual, tactile, and spatial ideas to solve problems. They explore experiences, stories, abstract concepts, social issues, and needs, both

individually and collaboratively. They experiment with materials, using processes and conventions to develop their visual enquiries and create both static and time-based works. They view art works, bringing their own experiences, sharing their responses, and generating multiple interpretations. Their meaning making is further informed by investigation of the contexts in which art works are created, used, and valued. As they develop their visual literacy, students are able to engage with a wider range of art experiences in increasingly complex and conscious ways. (MoE, 2007, p. 21)

- **Definitions of literacy in tertiary education policies**

In the *Tertiary Education Strategy 2013-2019* (MoE, 2014) it is stated that "A person's literacy refers to the extent of their oral and written language skills and knowledge and their ability to apply these to meet the varied demands of their personal study and work lives" (p. 58). A tertiary ready learner is described as "an independent learner with the ability and confidence to use a range of competencies and skills in a range of academic domains and problem-solving contexts" (Centre for Studies in Multiple Pathways, 2011, p. 6).

- **Five literacy models identified as potential pathways for success**

Five strands of literacy models were identified as potential pathways for success in art/design. The first strand, 'semantic literacy', is defined as argumentative reading and writing in which a relationship is constructed between adjoining words and clarifies the sense of a sentence (Newell et al., 2011). The second, 'syntactic literacy', is concerned with understanding and use of correct word order and concept organization in language. Barbousas (2014) and Barton (2019) expand the syntactic concept to include 'visuality', claiming that the visual possesses

characteristics of a language, analogous to reading and writing.

The third strand, 'visual literacy', is associated with "multiliteracy and multimodality, thus developing concerns with visual arts education as visual culture" (Duncum, 2004, p. 254). Barton (2019) concurs that visual literacy in art / design education is expressed through students' ability to see, analyze, and respond to the world around them, identifying contexts and applying these to their aesthetic outputs. Thus, visual arts literacy demands integration and synthesizing of various forms of communication and meaning making in the arts to support students becoming literate in aesthetic discourse. Expanding on this, Barbousas (2014) contends that "the visual image as an outcome of literacy formation is an intentional object … mobilised through practices that adhere with art world relationships" (p. 52).

The fourth strand is 'digital literacy'. Hegarty et al. (2010) describe a digitally literate person in a tertiary environment as someone who demonstrates "openness, the ability to problem solve, to critically reflect, technical capability and a willingness to collaborate and keep up to date prompted by the changing contexts in which they use information" (p. 7). Independent from the above, yet dependent on digital capability, the fifth strand, 'Information Literacy' (IL) concerns information management. Madjar et al. (2010), in secondary school contexts, and Hulett et al. (2013) within university settings, pinpoint the basis of IL skillsets as developing students' familiarity with, dexterity in, and navigational use of information to facilitate research, note taking, reading strategies, participation in critiques and critical

discussion (Elkins, 2010). However, Johnson (2018) found in her examination of low SES students' progression into tertiary study they require induction to academic systems and processes to facilitate full participation in university life.

The Research Findings

Secondary school art teachers – beliefs and strategies

It was evident that the secondary school art teachers employed strategies aimed at equipping students "to develop visual literacy and aesthetic awareness" as defined in *The New Zealand Curriculum* (MoE, 2007, p. 21). At School A, however, there were significant literacy engagement and retention challenges. Teacher A-1 said, "I don't often teach the same students from years 9-13 (13-18 year olds) … often I'm picking up new students in their final year." Her comment that "students and their families move around a lot" reflects residential mobility statistics that affect engagement (Dixon, 2018). Teacher A-2 described the complex socioeconomic issues facing students, describing them as "children with adult problems." These observations align with research about the widening gap and inequalities for health and social outcomes (Carroll et al., 2011). School B, while classified as decile 7, has a significant cohort of students from low income families who live in the area to escape escalating suburban rentals. The teachers spoke of the challenges that family circumstances create and how they and students negotiate access to knowledge and learning shaped by income

disparity (Carroll et al., 2011; Easton, 2013). Two key themes emerged from the interviews:

- **Delivery structures to reflect the learning preferences of students**

The teachers at both schools structure students' learning around a mix of internal assessment activities through the year, affording longer lead times for developing practical art making knowledge which is then scaffolded into more complex academic literacy tasks. Delivery focuses on all four curriculum strands tailored to specific student cohorts, concentrating around Developing Practical Knowledge (PK) and Understanding the Arts in Context (UC). Teacher 1-B explained that for UC, research is mainly through practical tasks and annotated notes. Developing Ideas (DI) and Communicating and Interpreting (CI) are included throughout so that all four strands are encompassed. At School A, the focus is also on practical strategies. Teacher A-2 said, "When we introduce an 'artist model' the students need to understand the artist's processes, so we demonstrate something similar so they can see how the art is made and understand it from a practical perspective." Common to both schools was Teacher B-1's approach whereby students are supported to develop literacy through art in "a continual process of visual research, making something, and then we critique and evaluate, and then we plan again for a bit more visual research."

Teacher B-1 described how two female students, both 17 year olds, were "non-achievers in previous years." Her strategy to assist them achieve success was allowing

them to have full use of the photography studio, and freedom to invite friends to collaborate, and exploring themes that resonated with their cultural heritage. Using friends as models inspired these girls to produce beautiful images that capture their ethnicities and cultural identifiers, a pedagogical approach advocated in the curriculum. The Māori student [Fig. 1] emphasized signifiers of her cultural heritage, including the kauwae (chin tattoo), rau manu (head feather), kahu huruhuru (feather cloak) and some whakairo (carving), a key element in a wharenui (Māori meeting house).

Figure 1 *Female, Māori, 17 years, School B – NCEA Level 2 Photography (from portfolio)*

In the photograph below [Fig. 2], the Pacific Island student of Niuean heritage encapsulates her distinctive cultural signifiers such as the Niuean hiapo (tapa cloth) with its strong contrast of black patterns painted on bark cloth, printed lava lava (wraparound skirt)

with its stylized patterns from nature, mother-of-pearl shell pendant, necklaces of cowrie

shells and seeds, and finely woven ili (fan) attached to a large shell. Teacher B-1 noted, "This

success in photography meant that these two students made gains in other areas of the

curriculum."

Figure 2 *Female, Niuean, 17 years, School B - NCEA Level 2 Photography (from portfolio)*

Teacher B-2 spoke of how two male students "excelled in the art program, and their

achievement was instrumental to their engagement in developing confidence in more

traditional forms of semantic literacy." The student below [Fig. 3] reconnected with academic

subjects at school, countering his noted 'distraction' and behavioral issues. To support him,

and other students, she allows them access to the Google account on her website, giving this

student space to focus on visual skills using rewindable and digital learning tasks to scaffold

semantic and syntactical literacy around the production of his images. The work developed

from his involvement with gaming and "how he responded to the look and storylines of

gaming through developing digital literacies."

Figure 3 *Male, European, 17 years, School B - NCEA Level 3 Painting portfolio (Excellence)*
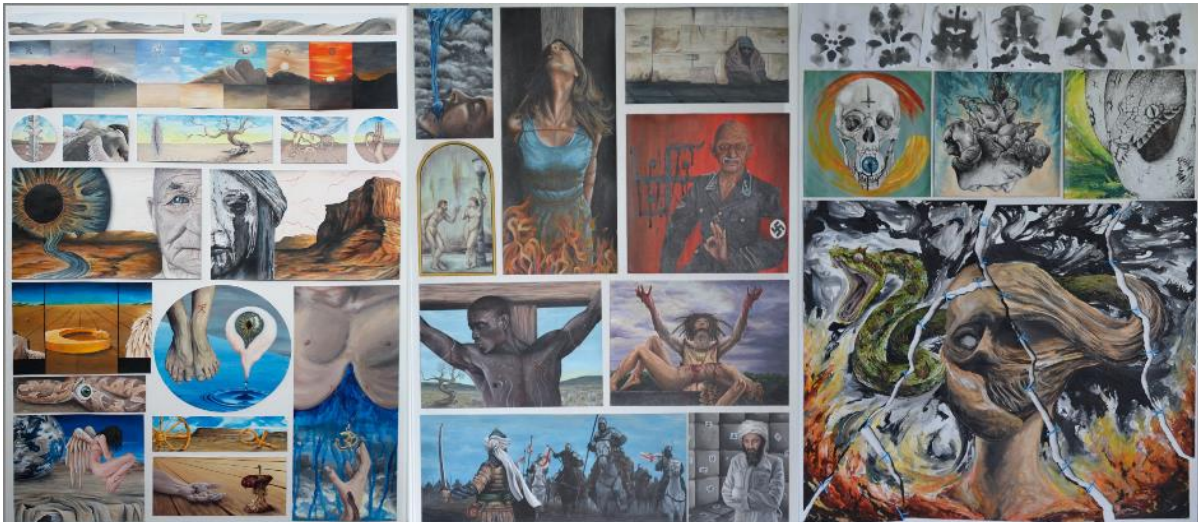
Figure 4 *Male, Māori-European, 17 years, School B - NCEA Level 3 Painting portfolio (Excellence and Scholarship)*

The student above [Fig. 4] emphasized attention to detail while developing an understanding of the conventions of gaming through his involvement with art as 'visual culture'. Teacher B-1 explained that he was contending with complex extra-curricular issues and was directed into the art program as a means of attaining NCEA: "The space to concentrate on developing a visual language became a pathway for him to develop associated forms of scholastic achievement in more academic areas of the curriculum. His Achievement with Excellence, as well as Scholarship at Level 3 for which written statements are required to support visual outcomes, attests to his ability to understand and use semantic and visual literacies."

- **Pedagogical challenges and opportunities**

A second theme that emerged at both schools was the differential rates of digital access and

the effects on students. Although low-decile schools receive greater government funding, the teachers reported that this does not translate into the level of digital capacity needed in their schools. Teacher A-2 stressed the implications for teaching and learning that financially based differential access has for students as they develop strategies to retrieve the knowledge that devices grant to users. All four teachers spoke of budgetary constraints on resourcing digital hardware and software to adequately support student learning. They also saw the prevalence of Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) polices in schools as exacerbating the difficulties of ensuring equitable access to learning and knowledge acquisition. Teacher B-1, noting the problems of resourcing digital delivery for the large cohort of low SES students in the art program, said "I only have 10 static computers in my class and these are for students from low decile families who don't have personal devices and uncapped data."

While each teacher was aware of the challenges that students bring to class, they acknowledged this provides opportunities for innovative pedagogical practices. They devise strategies to re-engage students who may only attend art classes. Teacher A-1 spoke of "going on a journey with students about their particular interests, such as 'tagging', to hook them in." A pattern evident in both schools was that curricula delivery guided by the 'strands' was augmented with significant components of on-line 'rewindable learning' (MoE, 2020a). Each employed Google sites, noting their presence as significant, easy to use, and allowing them to structure learning tasks for students to build on as they develop PK, UC, DI, and CI. Students

being able to revisit sites whenever it suited them, and for as many times as they need for learning, was considered a distinct advantage. This affirmation of rewindable learning models reflects Duncum's (2004) advocacy for student use of media outside the classroom.

Another strategy used by the teachers at both schools is for students to achieve 'Literacy Achievement Standards' for NCEA through art, in conjunction with their selected Visual Arts Standards. Teacher A-2 said, "We align practical learning tasks with literacy development which reflect the presence of digital technology in students' lives. This means our art courses have higher rates of attendance, retention, and student engagement." Teachers in School B develop questions to guide students toward written responses to enhance their understanding of art conventions, broad categories of art practices, and specific details within artist model exemplars. Teacher B-2 said, "This enables students answering questions to build up written work for assessment in the NCEA literacy achievement standards."

Teacher A-1 used a year 13 student's portfolio for NCEA Level 3 Painting to exemplify her approach to teaching literacy [Fig. 5]: "Understanding of context is one thing we emphasize, but students also develop and communicate ideas, and acquire practical knowledge as they go." She described this student as a high-level thinker who was successful in English, but art was the primary means for him to express his interest in what is happening in the world. Aligning with the curriculum's emphasis on students exploring issues that are of concern to them, "he sought solutions to social, community and identity questions. This work

references issues around our LGBTQI community and oppression of women, women's rights and things that concern him." His work exemplifies reference to the 'established practice' of artists, a key component of NCEA. He was inspired by the work of Jean-Michael Basquiat with its expressionist and graffiti style and enigmatic remarks about cultural and political issues. The artworks, and messages contained therein, support Leavy's (2015) assertion about the power of autobiographical visual data to communicate the "textured nature of social life while illuminating the link between individual experience and the macro context in which that experience occurs" (p. 260).

Figure 5 *Male, Tongan-Māori, 18 years, School A - NCEA Level 3 Painting*

(details from portfolio)

Tertiary art and design lecturers – challenges and strategies

Tertiary Lecturers 1-A and 1-B at Tertiary Institution 1 taught students in the first year art/design program. One aim of the research was to discover what strategies they use to meet the *Tertiary Education Strategy's 2013-2019* (MoE, 2014) definition of literacy: "A person's literacy refers to the extent of their oral and language skills and knowledge and their ability to apply these to meet the varied demands of their personal study and work lives" (p. 58).

Lecturer 1-A, born overseas, identifies New Zealand as home. She has undertaken much work to understand the lived experiences of students during 20 years in tertiary education as a student and studio-based lecturer. Much of her teaching concentrates on the

demands brought to the tertiary setting by students from low SES backgrounds. She identifies with them who, like herself, was a first in family tertiary student.

Lecturer 1-B is a European New Zealander and practicing artist. His focus on making art informs his teaching, imbuing it with a keen sense of the economic realities of forging a sustainable career. His work spans commercial and fine arts practice, thus emphasis is placed on students developing an "understanding of how imagery, videos, pictures, advertisements, and artworks communicate in ways that may be quite foreign to them." He admits that challenges facing many first-year students in navigating the acquisition of "new research and information literacy (IL) skills can put low SES students on the back foot academically."

At Tertiary Institution 1, the student cohort comprises 40% New Zealand European, 16% Pacific Island, and 11% Māori. The rates of tertiary progression are between 70% for Māori and 85% for Pacific people (MoE, 2020b). Two key themes emerged:

- **Delivery structures and pedagogical practices**

The lecturers agreed it was crucial for students to understand the shift from secondary school to a new pedagogical system. Lecturer 1-A noted, "Institutional mechanisms are reflected in the application of academic criteria contained within each dimension of learning." Both lecturers contextualize their pedagogy in light of Bernstein's (1999) distinction between "lived experience and pedagogical potential" (p. 267). This presents them and students with

potential for an expanded concept of literacy in art/design by incorporating students' lived experience. However, Lecturer 1-A was critical of the institution's emphasis on forms of literacy and pedagogical structures that reflect a degree of curricular bias. Milne (2013) refers to this bias as "gaps and silences" (p. 98). Lecturer 1-A said, "This is where institutions fall down because they do not adequately reflect on and match the criticality they demand from students."

Having worked extensively in first year programs, both understand the challenges facing students entering tertiary study. Johnson (2018) claims that higher education is aimed at an affluent mix of predominantly New Zealand European students. Lecturer 1-A agreed, noting that Pacific Island and Māori students and low SES students understand they enter tertiary education from "outside the canon … they know it when they walk in the door, they know it intimately because they're having to function in multiple worlds; they might be speaking and living by Tē Aō Māori tikanga at home, then having to function in a European world."

Lecturer 1-B concurred, noting that students "encounter a whole new way of having to fit into an academic system that might be outside their family experiences." Both lecturers said that students grapple with pedagogical structures concerned with delivering high caliber, research driven, subject specific epistemic knowledge which (Bernstein, 1999) describes as "codified" (p. 270). These lecturers recognize the challenges that understanding this codified

knowledge has for first in family students whose whānau (Māori extended family), kāinga (Māori home/dwelling), aiga (Samoan family), and community knowledge does not necessarily prepare them for tertiary study. Lecturer 1-A stressed that one challenge for students is to "understand the bureaucratic structure of academia." Bernstein describes this challenge as the acquisition by learners of a new and unfamiliar "order of pedagogical identity" (p. 271). Lecturer 1-B described this form of epistemic delivery as the institution "performing knowledge as though knowledge is an object." Lecturer 1-A also noted the difficulty many students face in accessing necessary forms of institutional 'cultural capital' in the transition into tertiary study. These are significant factors, evident in attrition that impacts on rates of learning success in first year programs.

Both lecturers referred to economic circumstances facing students at tertiary level; that financing full-time study is a barrier and government funding does not adequately support low SES students. Lecturer 1-B concluded, "The consequence for students struggling with time and resources is hindering their development of a new pedagogical identity underpinning the expression of criticality."

First year tertiary art and design students – insights and experiences

Students 1-A and 1-B, both 20 years old, completed their first year at Tertiary Institution 1. Both are the first in their family to pursue tertiary education. Student 1-A identifies as Māori

and Student 1-B as Māori-European. Both draw on tikanga Māori concepts to inform their respective fields of contemporary fashion and media practice. They enjoy family support, but circumstances constrain financial provision, resulting in part-time employment while studying full-time to make ends meet.

Each student reflected on their educational development and acquisition of new and advanced forms of knowledge in their respective fields. They shared a preference for visual and kinesthetic forms of knowledge – the physicality of making art – over semantic and syntactical knowledge, but understood the importance of developing practical arts-based knowledge through written reflection and critical discussion (Langer, 2001; Newell et al., 2011). Both noted, however, that instruction about how to research and reflect on a developing practice was not always well communicated. The most effective support was sharing practical knowledge and resources amongst peers, a student-initiated outcome of peer-to-peer learning conducted in the social context of tuakana-teina groups in which there is a relationship between a mentor and younger person.

- **First year Student 1-A**

Student 1-A said she found the transition to tertiary education difficult because "the difference in learning was too big … the first year was like secondary school in that it is still art, but the increase in workload is significant." She held the lecturers in high regard, noting

the extent and depth of their concern when learning was challenging for her. She was also aware that, as one of a small group of Māori and Pacific Island students in the program, "curricular delivery was directed towards the European majority." This reflects Milne's (2013) reference to the potential for curricular silences. For Student 1-A, the experience was of an unvoiced requirement to construct a new academic identity within the institution. She found self-directed learning difficult "because every day was largely self-directed, usually for an hour we'd have a teacher in the morning and that's it." Student 1-A felt "a bit lost and out of place" and uncertain about her future plans. Madjar et al. (2010) report that it is common for students to feel overwhelmed if they think they are failing in programs, a position made more stressful when they are first in family tertiary students from low SES communities.

When asked about her perceptions of visual culture in the context of literacy acquisition, Student 1-A said that the influence of web communications plays a large part in shaping her ideas: "For me, visual culture is the way in which people use social media to express themselves or a topic on social media platforms like YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and Reddit … these encourage creativity within my generation and keep us engaged with each other." Student 1-A opted not to offer examples of her art making which reflect her ideas about visual culture.

- **First year Student 1-B**

Student 1-B has contended with a level of 'residential mobility' (Dixon, 2018), attending more than one secondary school. While this was disruptive it provided insights into contrasting pedagogical models and how students work within them. Student 1-B offered cogent observations about the merits of a tightly controlled curricular framework, and a more liberal structure that grants greater freedoms about pathways to higher education or employment. She observed, however, that the pitfall of curricular freedom was that some students "fall through the cracks." Student 1-B understood the complexity in creative arts teaching and learning models, noting that "It's really hard because you need both, the structure and the freedom."

Above all, Student 1-B said she experienced difficulty with "the academic writing thing … I assumed I was going to art school to do art and learn about art, but not to write about things." She received no effective signposting at school of what lay ahead in tertiary education, or emphasis on critical thinking and the place of academic reading and writing in art/design programs. Student 1-B found that facilitation and delivery of arts-based critically-applied knowledge in the first year program was not always consistent. While she recognized the expectation to employ "critical thinking in general and thinking about contexts around art, this was not made clear enough." She was inexperienced with critical discussion about artworks and struggled to understand how to participate in the studio. She also felt the

emphasis on "the conceptual thing was not adequately matched by clear communication about the scope of resources that students could access to develop practical and theoretical aspects of their practice in their first year courses."

Figure 6 *Female, Māori-European, 20 years, Student 1-B, first year tertiary student*

Despite her misgivings about aspects of the program, Student 1-B found she had space within it to explore her Māori-European heritage and contemporary cultural identity. For her hand printed fabric designs [Figure 6] she drew upon a key motif, the 'koru' (a spiral shape based on the appearance of a new unfurling silver fern frond) portrayed in customary and contemporary Māori taonga (treasures) and art making. Stylised forms of Māori whakairo (carving) and images inspired by popular visual culture sourced from the web are also evident in these studies.

Conclusions

What became apparent from the data were the distinct differences between the secondary schools' and the tertiary institution's environments, curricula and pedagogical practices, relationships with students, particularly Māori and Pacific Island from low SES communities, and approaches to literacy acquisition.

There was a strong correlation between the knowledge the four secondary school art teachers held of their particular school's community, the consequent struggles for students with troubled lives in homes that were experiencing low socio-economic circumstances, and how the support they gave students was enacted in their classrooms. This was aided by having whanau / family-based secondary school art environments in which students were

encouraged to work collaboratively if they wished, and a comparatively small cohort of 16-18 year old students studying art at years 12 and 13. The art teachers understood the benefits of tuakana teina relationships. Their pedagogical practices were assisted by having a national art curriculum that is open-ended, yet offers opportunity for young people to tell their stories about their cultural backgrounds [Figs 1-2], interests in contemporary visual culture [Figs 3-4], and issues with which they connect [Fig 5]. In respect of 'literacy', both schools offered students the opportunity to gain credits through the Literacy Achievement Standards, in addition to the selected visual arts standards.

The art teachers' pedagogies and students' art works also reflected a shortcoming of the national curriculum – an emphasis on 'visual literacy' but a lack of specificity about the importance of 'semantic' and 'syntactic' literacy, and little reference to verbal and written critique and critical reflection. The year 12 photography students produced lovely images that encapsulated aspects of their cultural identities. Although ideal as a starting point, an opportunity was missed to extend these students' thinking and art making to a more robust socio-cultural-political and critical level that reflects less idealized representations. The year 13 student [Fig. 4] who gained Scholarship, as well as Excellence, was likely the most prepared for transitioning to tertiary level study. As Johnson (2018) asserts, low SES students' progression to the tertiary environment requires induction to academic systems and processes to facilitate full participation in university life.

The voices of the two tertiary art / design lecturers revealed they had the interests of students at heart. Both were aware that many first year students from low SES backgrounds face challenges with negotiating acquisition of research and information literacy skills and mastery of oral and written language skills required at tertiary level, and how these gaps can disadvantage them as they progress through education. The two Māori first year students found the transition from secondary schools, located in their particular cultural communities, to large classes of 50 students in which they were a cultural minority, difficult and alienating. They found solace in tuakana teina support. Above all, they felt unprepared for the level of self-directed learning expected of them. Their responses point to a need for induction, at the outset of first year tertiary study, to assist with the transition from the personal and individually supportive style of secondary schooling to independent, research driven and critically-centered study that is expected at tertiary level. Initial induction, ongoing support, and more face-to-face contact with lecturers could well help to reduce attrition rates among low SES tertiary students.

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