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Visual art education: The tangle of beliefs

Abstract

Personal and professional beliefs about visual art directly influence the pedagogical and professional choices of early childhood teachers, Gai Lindsay, Lecturer and Coordinator of Regional Campuses, The Early Years, University of Wollongong, writes.

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Personal and professional beliefs about visual art directly influence the pedagogical and professional choices of early childhood teachers, Gai Lindsay, Lecturer and Coordinator of Regional Campuses, The Early Years, University of Wollongong, writes.

A teacher's belief about their personal ability to make art, along with pedagogical beliefs about art learning, frequently override any training in visual art pedagogy undertaken during preservice training.

Even though visual arts are valued as central to play-based practice within early childhood settings, many early childhood teachers do not perceive themselves to be artistic (Lindsay 2015). While able to present children with a range of art materials and activities some teachers lack the confidence and the pedagogical content knowledge to effectively plan for, implement and evaluate the visual art provisions made in their classrooms.

This article will briefly summarise the divergent and often contradictory beliefs represented in a qualitative case study. Three theories that contribute to a clearer understanding about the ways beliefs influence practice will be outlined before presenting several reflective considerations.

No consensus

Case study research with 12 participants in four regional early childhood education and care services is examining what early childhood teachers and vocationally trained teachers believe, say and do regarding their visual art pedagogy. Among the research participants there was little consensus about the purpose of visual art in the curriculum. While some position visual art experiences as tools for therapy, creativity, communication or meaning making, others view art as a fun way to keep children busy.

Teachers concurrently state how important visual art is within early childhood settings while expressing doubts about their own visual art knowledge, confidence and capacity to deliver high quality arts experiences to children. Some say teachers should engage actively alongside children to model and scaffold skills, while others remain hands off and refuse to model art techniques for fear of corrupting children's natural artistic development.

Glitter or clay?

Great variance in both visual art methods and the quality of art materials raises concerns about the provisions and learning opportunities presented to

children. Some teachers justify the use of commercially produced materials such as fluorescent feathers, glitter-glue and pom-poms as more fun and entertaining than quality open-ended visual art materials such as clay, charcoal and high quality paints. The educational leaders in services have considerable influence upon visual art practice, with arts-inspired leaders effectively guiding their teams. On the other hand leaders with low visual art self-efficacy confess that they have neither the knowledge nor the skills to effectively lead their colleagues in quality visual art pedagogies. Of significant concern is that none of the participants in the study had clear recollection of the visual art coursework undertaken during their preservice training.

“Some teachers justify the use of commercially produced materials such as fluorescent feathers and pom-poms as more fun than quality materials such as clay and high quality paints.”

Wide range

While the findings of one case study cannot be generalised to all education and care services, the tangle of divergent beliefs identified in the study suggest that visual art provisions in early childhood settings potentially range from outstanding to deficient. This is a concern when references to the visual arts in the Australian Early Years Learning Framework are not explicit. Notions of creative and visual languages are embedded within learning outcomes related to communication, identity, confident learning and multiple-intelligence. Yet, if teachers lack visual art self efficacy (Bandura 1997) and pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman 1987) and do not exercise a growth mindset to overcome

fixed beliefs (Dweck 2006), children's visual art learning and development may be restricted.

Theories about beliefs

Bandura explains that self-efficacy beliefs result from the judgments people make about their ability to bring about desired outcomes (1997). Low teacher self efficacy in the arts can cause professional paralysis (Kindler 1996) and be an obstacle to effective teaching and learning (Alter et al. 2009). The way teachers perceive the nature of intelligence also affects their approach to supporting children's learning. Dweck (2006) explains that people with a fixed mindset believe that ability and intelligence are inborn and difficult to alter. This fatalistic view of learning would consider that people are either born artistic or not. If art skills did not develop easily and naturally, people with this mindset would quickly give up and state that they were not artistic. In comparison those with a growth mindset believe that intelligence is changeable through effort.



Persistence pays off

Such people focus on learning processes and skills development and are willing to persist when faced with challenges. They would view skills development in art making as no different to learning skills in any other domain. Combined with these belief theories, a teacher's pedagogical content knowledge has a profound effect on the visual art curriculum offered to children. Pedagogical knowledge encompasses the 'how' of teaching while content knowledge constitutes the 'what' of teaching. Shulman (1987) explained the need for teachers to effectively combine the knowledge of how to teach with subject content knowledge, pre-empting Bamford's (2009) warning that the range of benefits available to children through visual art engagement are only possible when effective, quality provisions are made by teachers.

Where to from here?

It is hoped that this research, through sharing the beliefs, stories and experience of the participants, will offer a context for teachers to reflect on their own visual art beliefs and practice. Elliot Eisner (1973-1974, p15) urged teachers to "examine our beliefs with all the clarity we can muster" to support theoretical and practical growth. To that end teachers are encouraged to ask themselves the following questions.

Am I a co-researcher using the language of art in projects of inquiry with children or an observant entertainment director?

Do I provide high quality aesthetic materials or gaudy commercial materials?

Do I feel confident to apply visual art methods, techniques and theories or abdicate this role to colleagues perceived as 'arty'?

Do I model visual art skills and techniques or provide a variety of materials for experimentation, hoping that learning will naturally emerge from any and all experience?

Do I exercise a fixed or a growth mindset about my capacity to develop and foster skills and knowledge in the visual arts?

In conclusion, the words of a research participant encourage personal and professional growth:

"I think you need to understand how to support children to express themselves creatively. If you don't have that kind of background or knowledge, you're not going to get the most out of them or appreciate the work that they do. Some art is just for the sake of it, but some things really do portray meaning, and if you're not asking the questions or looking for it, it can be missed and undervalued."

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