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Abstract

Contradicting the regularly quoted mantra that 'it's the process not the product', calendar events often drive the mass production of identical seasonal products such as footprint reindeers, Valentine cards or paper-plate Easter bunnies.

Keywords

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Contradicting the regularly quoted mantra that 'it's the process not the product', calendar events often drive the mass production of identical seasonal products such as footprint reindeers, Valentine cards or paper-plate Easter bunnies. Such activities are often selected from Pinterest or the latest Facebook post rather than emerging from the interests of children. While some educators view such 'craftivities' as harmless fun, others believe that they limit children's opportunity to develop skills and confidence in the 'language' of art.

There are many benefits for children in making art including enjoyment, problem solving, communication, self-discipline, holistic learning and fostering creativity. However, Bamford (2009) warns that such benefits only exist when educators provide effective quality art experiences. Most early childhood educators would agree that visual art methods and materials are an important part of their daily practice with children. But research suggests that there is a lot of confusion and not much agreement about which types of activity produce a quality art experience.

An educator's knowledge, skills and confidence to make and teach art influences their visual art pedagogy. Contributing to this lack of confidence, many educators have little if any memory of visual art coursework in their training. Such differences in visual art practice can result in wide differences in learning outcomes for children (DEEWR, 2010). Considering the

lack of subject guidance and educator confidence, it is not surprising that many educators believe that any and all experiences that use art materials are artistic and beneficial for children. Instead of being able to classify different types of activity as exploratory, experimental, sensory, crafty or artistic depending on the intentions, materials and processes used, many educators evaluate activities for their capacity to be cute, fun and keep children happy and busy.

Many educators confuse the difference between art and craft. Both art and craft require the use of skills, processes and techniques applied to a range of materials to achieve a goal or to serve a purpose. Craft is usually pre-planned and requires step-by-step instructions to achieve a specific result. Art on the other hand is open-ended and the outcome is determined by the art-maker. While both types of experience can potentially support children's learning and engagement, the difference between them is a bit like the difference between closed and open-ended questions. Some questions produce a predictable one-word response, while others open up unknown opportunities to share ideas, feelings and opinions.

So how can educators best support children's rich learning and growth in visual art? It may be helpful to reflect on the following questions to ensure a balanced approach.

1. Is our visual art planning built on children's prior interests, skills and knowledge?
2. Do we provide a wide range of open-ended, high-quality visual art materials?
3. Are materials displayed invitingly and readily accessible to children at all times?
4. Do educators in our team have confidence with visual art methods and skills?

5. Do we engage in any activities where the educator fixes, controls or adds to the children's work to achieve a desired outcome? Is everyone expected to have a turn?
6. Do we believe children are capable and respect their ideas and efforts?

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