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# Do visual art experiences in early childhood settings foster educative growth or stagnation?

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# Do visual art experiences in early childhood settings foster educative growth or stagnation?

## **Abstract**

This article offers findings from research that examined the visual art beliefs and pedagogy of early childhood educators and supports reflection about the educational merit of different types of visual art experience offered to children. The range of visual art experiences typically delivered in early childhood education settings varies significantly in method and purpose, yet there is little guidance to support early childhood educators to evaluate the visual art experiences they include in the curriculum or to consider their role as art educators. At the same time, the research literature suggests that pre-school educators lack confidence to make and teach art and that their visual art subject knowledge is limited. Qualitative case study research examined the visual art beliefs and pedagogy of twelve educators located in four Australian early childhood education settings. Data collection methods included interviews, environmental audits and analysis of pedagogical documentation about visual art provisions. John Dewey's philosophies of democracy, education and art synthesised with the philosophy and pedagogical values of the Reggio Emilia educational approach support interpretation and analysis of the research data. In particular, Dewey's philosophy of consummatory experience and growth alongside Eisner's discussions about visual art myths and null curricula guide reflection about visual art provisions in early childhood contexts. A continuum of visual art experience is proposed to support reflection about the types of experience that potentially mis-educate and lead to visual art stagnation compared with experiences that may foster consummatory and educative growth.

## **Keywords**

growth, do, childhood, educative, stagnation, early, experiences, art, visual, foster, settings

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## Do Visual Art Experiences in Early Childhood Settings Foster Educative Growth or Stagnation?

### Art in Early Childhood

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#### ABSTRACT

**This article offers findings from research that examined the visual art beliefs and pedagogy of early childhood educators and supports reflection about the educational merit of different types of visual art experience offered to children. The range of visual art experiences typically delivered in early childhood education settings varies significantly in method and purpose, yet there is little guidance to support early childhood educators to evaluate the visual art experiences they include in the curriculum or to consider their role as art educators. At the same time, the research literature suggests that pre-school educators lack confidence to make and teach art and that their visual art subject knowledge is limited.**

**Qualitative case study research examined the visual art beliefs and pedagogy of twelve educators located in four Australian early childhood education settings. Data collection methods included interviews, environmental audits and analysis of pedagogical documentation about visual art provisions. John Dewey's philosophies of democracy, education and art synthesised with the philosophy and pedagogical values of the Reggio Emilia educational approach support interpretation and analysis of the research data. In particular, Dewey's philosophy of consummatory experience and growth alongside Eisner's discussions about visual art myths and null curricula guide reflection about visual art provisions in early childhood contexts. A continuum of visual art experience is proposed to support reflection about the types of experience that potentially mis-educate and lead to visual art stagnation compared with experiences that may foster consummatory and educative growth.**

#### INTRODUCTION

Despite visual art being valued as central to play-based practice within early childhood contexts (Bamford, 2009; Vecchi, 2010; Wright, 2012), "there remains a large and growing gulf between the 'lip service' given to arts education and the provisions" made in educational contexts (Bamford, 2013, p.177). While early childhood educators readily acknowledge the desire to provide a range of educative and fun art activities, the research literature suggests these educators lack the pedagogical content knowledge and confidence to scaffold children's learning and to personally engage with art-making processes (McArdle & Piscitelli, 2002; Terreni, 2010; Twigg & Garvis, 2010; Garvis, 2012). Scholars suggest that the visual arts are not utilised

effectively in early childhood contexts due to low educator confidence (Oreck, 2004; Klopper & Power, 2010; Garvis, 2011), low visual art self-efficacy (McCoubrey, 2000; Garvis, Twigg, & Pendergast, 2011), limited visual art knowledge (Hedges & Cullen, 2005; Miraglia, 2008; Garvis & Pendergast, 2010; Stott, 2011) and a perceived lack of parental and societal value for the arts (Buldu & Shaban, 2010; Öztürk & Erden, 2011). While previous studies have quantified pre-service teacher beliefs about visual art within broad summative statements, few have explored and described the visual art beliefs and practices of early childhood educators in their own words. The scarcity of research in Australian preschool contexts, coupled with ongoing national quality reforms and ambiguous visual art guidance within curriculum framework documents, underscore the need for research on this topic. There is a pressing need to fully appreciate the visual art beliefs and pedagogy of early years educators in order to support pedagogical reflection and growth for both practitioners and pre-service teacher educators.

This paper presents findings from qualitative case study research that examines the visual art beliefs and pedagogy of twelve Australian early childhood teachers and childcare educators (collectively referred to hereafter as educators). The constraints of a single article do not permit a full discussion of the wide variation in teacher and educator beliefs and their resulting visual art pedagogy. Therefore, research findings that illuminate pedagogical ambiguity about art processes and art products will identify several educator beliefs that may influence the pedagogical provisions made for children. To support critical engagement with the research data, a brief overview of the conceptual framework developed to interrogate the visual art beliefs and pedagogy of the participants will be outlined. In particular, Dewey's philosophy of consummatory experience and growth alongside discussions about visual art myths and null curricula (Eisner, 1973-1974; Kindler, 1996; Jalongo, 1999) provoke reflection about the types of visual art experiences offered in early childhood contexts. In conclusion, a continuum of visual art experience is proposed as a useful framework for educators to evaluate their visual art pedagogy and to consider which visual art provisions best foster 'consummatory' educative growth and which experiences may potentially be considered stagnant and 'mis-educative' (Dewey, 1939). This continuum of art experience may enlighten reflection about visual art beliefs and practice for many early years educators and pre-service teachers.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

A constructivist world-view underpins the qualitative research design to position knowledge and skills as the consequence of active, hands-on experience with both materials and other people. Twelve participants located in four Australian early childhood education settings generously shared their visual art beliefs, knowledge and practice. Data was collected through interviews, environmental audits and analysis of pedagogical documentation for a six-month period. In order to appreciate and disclose the experience and insights of the researcher and to respectfully give voice to the visual art beliefs and pedagogy of Australian early childhood educators, the comparative case-study applied Barone and Eisner's (1997; 2012) conception of connoisseurship and criticism within an arts-based educational research paradigm. Underpinning data analysis and the research design, a conceptual framework guided reflection about concepts such as the role of the educator, the image of the child, environment, materials and visual art pedagogy.

## CONCEPTUAL REFLECTION AND INSIGHT

Developed to support data analysis and interpretation, the conceptual framework synthesised the philosophical and pedagogical links between John Dewey's educational philosophy with the key tenets of the internationally renowned Reggio Emilia Educational Project in northern Italy. This synthesis is grounded in Dewey's considerable historic influence upon the exemplary visual art pedagogies in Reggio Emilia (Lindsay, 2015). Despite the fact that Dewey's ideas about art and education were written at the turn of the 20th century, they offer contemporary early childhood educators refreshing insights about quality visual art pedagogy.

### ARTFUL EDUCATION - DEWEY

Dewey (1934) defined art as a process of doing and making, where physical materials and tools are applied to the production of "something visible, audible or tangible" (p.48). He identified that young children's play has artistic qualities and positioned hands-on play and exploration as the foundation for all learning. Progressive for his time, Dewey (1915) proposed that children's interests should be central within educational processes (p.34). Rebelling against educational methods that dominate and subdue the interests of children, Dewey (1934) poetically positioned communication through art as the "incomparable organ of instruction", elevating teaching and learning through art as a "revolt" against educational methods that "exclude the imagination" and "the desires and emotions of men" (p.361). Indeed, Dewey (1915) proposed that children's innate impulse to reproduce ideas graphically and communicate meaning using aesthetic materials integrates play, aesthetic awareness, communication and cognition. Informing the Reggio Emilian concepts of the 'image of the child', 'the hundred languages of children' and the 'atelier', Dewey promoted art-centred educational methods that respond to the interests and activity of the child.

### ARTFUL EDUCATION - REGGIO EMILIA

Following Dewey's progressive philosophy, educators in Reggio Emilia reject pedagogies of transmission and reproduction to advance a respectful pedagogy that intentionally listens to children, gives voice to their theories and makes their learning visible (Rinaldi, 2013). The processes of doing and making are not defined as art, but like Dewey before them, the educators in Reggio Emilia position art materials and methods as visual languages and as tools for communication, research and making meaning (Vecchi, 2010; Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2012). A central atelier (art studio), classroom ateliers and the role of the atelierista (art educator) all testify to the central place that is given to visual art methods and materials as languages that support children's learning to be made visible. Predestined results and stereotyped products are discouraged. Instead, materials and contexts support children to explore and communicate their ideas visually. Children's research and play processes are valued and documented to investigate children's learning processes and to make learning visible through graphic and poetic representation.

### PROVISIONS, PROVOCATIONS AND PARADOXICAL BELIEFS

Despite Dewey's rich ideas about art education and high quality exemplars of visual art practice, such as that developed in Reggio Emilia, the research findings confirm that many "Early

Childhood Educators continue to struggle with ideas about the place of art in the curriculum and the most effective way to teach it" (Twigg & Garvis, 2010, p.193). Amongst the twelve study participants, there was wide variation and some ambiguity in how educators classified, justified or condemned various art activities and experiences. For some of the participants, any experience or activity that involved art materials was legitimised as art. Others judged the merit of an experience on whether it was messy, unquestioningly equating mess-making and sensory experience with creative expression and development. Some labelled the art process as more important than the art product, while paradoxically justifying an assortment of identical creations that could only be considered product focussed. Other educators discerningly classified the various types of experience as exploratory, experimental, sensory, crafty or artistic, suggesting that different types of art experience may serve different learning goals and purposes. This disparate range of beliefs about visual art pedagogy, while not able to be generalised from the comparative case study to all early childhood contexts, nonetheless suggests that there is a lack of certainty amongst early childhood educators regarding their content knowledge, beliefs and confidence in visual art pedagogies.

Eisner (1973-1974), Kindler (1996) and Jalongo (1999) suggest that, in early childhood contexts, a range of unexamined beliefs, myths and pedagogical habits have had a detrimental affect on educator beliefs, knowledge and their resulting visual art pedagogy. These decades-old challenges continue to be highly relevant in current Australian early childhood contexts with the research participants voicing incompatible, disparate and mythical beliefs about visual art provisions.

#### CONSIDERING ART PROVISIONS

During interviews, the research participants were asked to respond to images depicting a range of art experiences. The images represented open-ended experiences such as easel painting, print-making, drawing and clay work; sensory and exploratory activities like marble-roller painting and bubble-prints; and structured craft activities and stencils. Educator responses to the images, coupled with their interview commentary, highlighted incongruent beliefs regarding whether the experiences were indeed art; whether the experiences were considered appropriate for young children; whether educators would or would not provide such experiences; and whether the experiences were deemed to have educational merit. The unique combination of the participant's pedagogical and visual art content knowledge within the context of each early childhood setting revealed beliefs about the educator's role in facilitating art processes and products that merits further examination.

#### THE MYTH OF THE CORRUPTIBLE CHILD

Six of the twelve participants expressed the belief that children's natural artistic development is best fostered when educators provide a range of art materials, along with emotional support, while refraining from any intervention in children's art making process. Eisner (1973-1974) labelled the belief that adult instruction and modelling can corrupt children's innocent perceptions and visual art expression as mythical (p.11). Yet in one location, the research participants embraced this 'myth' as sacred. One participant, despite previous training and some expertise in visual art techniques, adamantly refused to model, guide or participate with children in the art-making process stating,

I think the worst thing I could do as an educator, the way that I could most fail the children is by me drawing something and them seeing how I draw something as a standard... There is just no need. It's completely superfluous and potentially damaging.

In direct contradiction, when asked how children develop knowledge and skills in other learning domains, all three participants in this location stated that children learn through observation, modelling and instruction, a view that aligned with their curriculum policy assertion that 'guidance and teaching by educators shape children's experiences of becoming'. Despite the lead teacher's frequently expressed value for artistic expression and creativity, the belief that children's art development can be corrupted by adult engagement governed pedagogical discourse and practice. This ban on educators teaching or facilitating art experiences beyond the provision of basic materials ironically resulted in an almost non-existent art curriculum with only poor quality paint, pencils and crayons and small A4 paper presented to children for the whole six months of data collection.

This case exemplifies Dewey's (1902) assessment that some educators, seeing "no alternative between forcing the child from without" consequently leave them "entirely alone" (p.17). Contemporary scholars claim that despite the emergence of constructivist pedagogical approaches, the visual art beliefs and practice of early childhood educators largely remain entrenched in out-dated developmental approaches (Richards, 2007; Terreni, 2010; Stott, 2011; Thompson, 2015), a concern repeated in a recent Australian report (Monash University, 2011). Added to this, educator zeal for non-intervention is often reinforced by the myth of the art process versus the art product (Kindler, 1996).

#### THE PROCESS VERSUS PRODUCT MYTH

Eisner (1973-1974) challenged the widely held notion that the art process is more important than the product. Reflecting Dewey, Eisner (1973-1974) attests that the product is evidence of the processes employed and claims that to "neglect one in favour of the other is to be pedagogically naïve" (p.11). Yet, in early childhood settings, the mantra that the art process is more important than the product prevails (McArdle & Wong, 2010). Expressed as an aversion to the mass assembly of art-products, the mantra figured heavily in the research participant's evaluation of the merit of various art activities. When asked to explain their response to the 'process is more important than the product' mantra, one educator stated, "So definitely the process rather than the product. I love the fact that I come here and there are drawings up on the wall that are not ten of all the exact same drawings."

Participants also expressed views about the importance of joy in the experience of making art, the pleasure in the process, the creative outlet and the freedom of exploration where there are no wrong answers. For example,

There's no right or wrong, it's just what the child is able to do with the materials. That's all you want, is for them to enjoy it really. That's what I want... is just to see them enjoy something and not to be bogged down with how to get it right. That outweighs whatever is presented at the end.

Others, however, appreciated that making either/or distinctions between the process and the product is not always helpful. One participant in particular stated, "In relation to early learning visual arts, I think the process allows a discovery, it allows skills to emerge, it allows an idea to

emerge, concepts to emerge...BUT...I've seen how children value a product."

This reflective statement added a dose of contradiction to the oft-quoted 'process versus product' mantra. The participant wondered what the responsibility of the educator should be when children express value for the product as well as engagement with the process. While some educators in the study reflectively considered the balancing act between process and product, others were less sure about which art processes and their resulting products best support children's learning and growth. Dewey provides educators with a framework for reflection about ways to consider both art processes and products.

## A DEWEYAN CHALLENGE

Dewey (1934) proposed that the "work" of art is both the process and the product (p. 222). He warned against an elitist attitude to art products that would separate them from the efforts, emotions and ideas of the artist. Conversely, to elevate process over product reduces art expression to a "discharging" of "personal emotion" (Dewey, 1934, pp. 85-86). His idea that aesthetic or artful products result only from aesthetic or artful processes (Dewey, 1934, p.290) suggests that children's art products may reveal much about the quality of the learning process that led to their production. Indeed, art products may be examined as the evidence or artifacts of children's learning processes.

Dewey (1934) valued the playful and serious learning made possible through children's intrinsic drive to explore, experiment and express their ideas. He considered the processes of children's play, like the processes of art, to be a phenomenon that embraces freedom of expression alongside the view that play "is transformed into work" when the "activity is subordinated to production of an objective result" (Dewey, 1934, p. 291). It is instructive to note that Dewey distinguished between child-inspired, unconstrained, play-based work and the imposition of toil or labour that results when activities are focused only on procuring an end result (1934, p.290). Such discernment is exemplified in contemporary Reggio Emilia, with Vecchi (2010) expressing their determination to

"illustrate the extraordinary, beautiful and intelligent things children knew how to do" by eliminating the "widespread work circulating in early childhood services at the time, where mostly teachers' minds and hands were central and children had a marginal role, which led to the same stereotyped products for all." (p.132)

Indeed, Dewey's dualistic value for both process and product inspire educator reflection about adult imposed, product driven art and craft activities. His idea that artwork must extend beyond emotional discharge also guides cautious reflection about viewing art activities as therapeutic busy work and a cure for boredom. Indeed, Dewey (1939) advised that not all experiences are equal and that 'mis-educative' experiences can stagnate children's current and future learning, stating:

The belief that all genuine education comes about through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative. Experience and education cannot be directly equated to each other. For some experiences are mis-educative. Any experience is mis-educative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience. (p.13)



Focussed on the “quality of experience which is had”, Dewey (1939, p.16) suggests that while potentially enjoyable, activities not based upon children’s interests and processes of inquiry are rushed and “all on the surface” and do not have “great depth” or lead to conceptual growth or maturity (1934, p.46). He describes the transient excitation of children’s interest as an undigested meal or emotional palette tickling, saying the child is “forever tasting and never eating” and never experiencing the “organic satisfaction that comes only with the digestion of food and transformation of it into working power” (Dewey, 1902, p.16). Applying a contemporary metaphor one might describe the constantly rotating smorgasbord of entertaining and sensory art activities often seen in early childhood services as junk food compared to the nutritious meal of empowering, educative art processes that build upon past experiences to transform materials, produce aesthetic products, and propel children’s interests toward definite achievement and growth.

#### TO EDUCATE OR ENTERTAIN?

When responding to images of art experiences, participants in the study repeatedly commented on the entertainment value of activities. For example, when asked what motivates their visual art planning one animated participant stated, “I like to try and do a bit of everything, so they don’t get bored. I’m someone that likes to change things all the time. I like to do - like fly-swatter painting, balloon painting, collaging, easel, play dough.”

To this child-pleasing desire to entertain through art, Dewey (1934, 1939) suggested that even though children may respond positively to certain activities, in the absence of quality materials and developing skills and knowledge, both children and educators can be ignorant to the missed opportunity for enriching experience that leads to growth. Dewey’s distinction between genuine and mis-educative experiences finds parallels in the contemporary dichotomy between playful learning and edutainment (Resnick, 2004; Okan, 2003). More recently, in the field of edutainment, technology is added to the educational process to extrinsically motivate learning and make learning fun (Okan, 2003), suggesting that the intrinsic motivation to learn through play will somehow fail to overcome the chore (or the bore) of learning. Similarly, in early childhood settings, crafty, gimmicky, internet-inspired craftivities are justified when educators mistakenly believe that without such enticements, children will become bored. Bloom and Hanych (2002, cited in Okan, 2003) suggest that such approaches trivialize rather than promote the learning process.

Inspired by Dewey’s ideas, Eisner (2002) branded the learning opportunities children miss out on when educators lack the subject knowledge, skills or the self-confidence to deliver art experiences as the null curriculum. Jalongo (1999) outlines that the failure to teach visual art techniques destructively undermines children’s creativity, urging instead for children to be equipped with quality materials and knowledge about how to use them so that their ideas may find expression.

Identifying that some experiences may be less enriching, one participant commented on an image of a ‘patty-pan fish collage’ made of cupcake papers and plastic goggle-eyes saying,

They would enjoy it, but they wouldn’t know what they’re missing out on really... There may be some benefit as far as fine motor skills are concerned... but they don’t look like they’ve been done by a child at all. That’s not a child’s scissor cutting. That’s an educator’s cutting. Yes, it doesn’t really lend to the child exploring their own creativity and ability.

Expressing similar concerns, Dewey (1939) argued that while all experiences potentially increase automatic skills and can be “immediately enjoyable” they may also “promote the formation of a slack and careless attitude” which further reduces the quality of subsequent experiences (pp.13-14). Despite these potential limitations, participants justified structured crafts and novelty art activities due to their perception that children would enjoy them:

I'd say we probably trot all of those out now and then. The children really respond to them. They think it's fun. (It) doesn't really require any skill...I guess it is a freedom of expression... They're exploring different concepts like colour mixing and patterning. Different ways of applying paint. So yes, there's a place for it. It's fun. You want kids to have fun at pre-school. It's just an extra way of doing art.

Dewey (1902) explained that although such experiences do not automatically foster visual art learning and growth, educators and children may grow to prefer them through habitual routine:

Familiarity breeds contempt, but it also breeds something like affection...Unpleasant, because meaningless, activities may get agreeable if long enough persisted in. It is possible for the mind to develop interest in a routine or mechanical procedure, if conditions are continually supplied which demand that mode of operation and preclude any other sort. (pp.27-28)

Such pedagogical justifications justify Dewey's (1902) turn of the century complaint about what he called “cramped experiences” where he announced “I frequently hear dulling devices and empty exercises extolled because “the children take such an ‘interest’ in them” (p.28). His ideas present a challenge to contemporary early childhood educators to evaluate whether all forms of play automatically promote learning? Does the imperative to make learning fun justify the use of art materials for entertainment rather than education?

## DEWEY'S PREFERENCE FOR GROWTH

It must be noted however that Dewey did not condemn experiences that may be fun, experimental or exploratory. Rather he suggested that educators must appreciate and honour the agency and interests of the child in order to support children to progress beyond initial exploration and toward deeper growth and learning (Dewey 1939, p.16). He appreciated the joyful play and inquisitive activity of the child, but concurrently discussed the responsibility of the educator to give the child's activities direction:

All children like to express themselves through the medium of form and color. If you simply indulge this interest by letting the child go on indefinitely, there is no growth that is more than accidental. But let the child first express his impulse, and then through criticism, question, and suggestion bring him to consciousness of what he has done, and what he needs to do, and the result is quite different.(Dewey, 1915, p.40)

Dewey suggested that for educative or ‘consummatory’ growth to occur educators must share and not withhold their own knowledge and experience from the child (1902; 1939). They must interpret children's interests and integrate art into the child's experience, providing guidance so that art experiences build on prior experience and support skills development (Dewey, 1902). He proposed a model of active cooperation and shared engagement between educators and children (Dewey, 1916). Borrowing from Csikszentmihalyi (1996) this suggests that educators,

rather than delivering a repetitious cycle of sensory, busy-fun activities, which could be called 'small e' experiences, might instead draw upon Dewey's ideas about growth and learning to construct, along with children, 'big E' art experiences that build on prior skills and knowledge and lead to growth. Dewey (1934) explained that open-ended activities coupled with processes of authentic inquiry foster conditions where works of art can be produced (p.293). Such ideas highlight the educator's responsibility to educate (not only to entertain) and to extend upon children's natural curiosity and initial experiments with quality visual art materials. This was exemplified in one preschool setting where constructivist theories, including the Reggio Emilia educational example, drive pedagogical choices. One participant in this service explained how art techniques and skills are intentionally introduced, scaffolded and modelled by teachers:

Here, when introducing new media, we do it in a skills-based way at group, so that they're getting the opportunity to talk about the do's, the don'ts, what they're seeing. So hopefully that builds their confidence to use them in an independent way throughout the day. It's almost as if you need to introduce and shake hands with the material to become really comfortable enough to feel that you can go from exploration to mastery, then to creative use.

However, the research data suggests this may be a challenge for some educators, with most participants expressing doubt rather than confidence in their capacity to support children's learning using art materials and methods. The leader in one participant service expressed such doubts:

"Through my lack of knowledge, I provide a lot of, in my experience, very open-ended... Lots of different materials, but, not really developing skills. You know, I might talk about textures of things or the process in doing things. But not feeling confident in that area myself, I don't know the particular skills to teach."

Perhaps as Kindler (1996) attests, the conflicting and competing contexts of early childhood visual art pedagogy have resulted in a "professional paralysis" which has created a "fear of active involvement, perpetual uncertainties, and support a false notion of art that is so relative and so exclusive that individuals should be left to figure it out on their own" (p.25).

Certainly in the Australian context, there is little documented guidance for educators regarding visual art pedagogy. References to visual arts and creative languages in the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (DEEWR, 2009) are not explicit or prescriptive. Added to this, pre-service coursework is not adequately equipping educators with the skills, knowledge or confidence to effectively incorporate visual art learning in their learning environments (Miraglia, 2008; Garvis, 2012; Bailey & de Rijke, 2014). Such pedagogical ambiguity, across all levels of educator development seems to have resulted in the substitution of myths and mantras to guide practice. However, rather than unilaterally condemn educators or the types of visual art practice they implement, it may be more constructive to support educators to evaluate their own beliefs and practice.

## A PROPOSAL FOR PEDAGOGICAL REFLECTION AND GROWTH

It is important to note that while all experiences may contain some potential learning value for children, the role of the educator must be to focus upon the quality of the experience (Dewey, 1939). Drawing upon the research data alongside Dewey's constructivist art and education

philosophies and the Reggio Emilia approach, I therefore propose that a 'Continuum of Visual Art Experience' may support educators to reflect upon which visual art experiences in early childhood settings best foster consummatory and educative growth and which experiences may be considered potentially stagnant and mis-educative.

In Deweyan terms, if the goal is for children to engage in 'consummatory growth experiences', educators will intentionally build upon experimental and sensory experiences to provide regular and repeated open-ended opportunities for children to create, make meaning and communicate their ideas using high quality visual art materials. Familiarity with art materials and methods will support both children and educators to confidently use them. Educational experiences will build upon the interests of children and support their thinking to be made visible. Both process and product will be revered for their educative and aesthetic values. Pedagogical and visual art content knowledge will culminate in informed curriculum design. Employing constructivist principles, educators will apply the belief that art skills can be learned and taught. The educator located at this end of the continuum is a co-learner, co-researcher and co-teacher with children and remains hands-on in order to guide, suggest, challenge, scaffold and model visual art skills and methods.

Located between the extremes of the visual art continuum is the tendency for educators to rely on sensory, exploratory and experimental art activities such as balloon printing, marble roller painting, hand and foot-prints and finger-paint. As previously discussed, while such activities may be fun and keep children busy they have the potential to either lead to growth, if skills are developed and extended upon with the support of engaged and knowledgeable educators, or to stagnation through endless repetition of meaningless activity.

At the opposite end of the continuum are the types of experiences that have the potential to stagnate children's visual art growth. In contrast to consummatory growth experiences these activities may be a shallow and constantly revolving smorgasbord of close-ended tasks with narrow or pre-determined outcomes. An unexamined reliance on developmental theories may limit educator beliefs about young children's (and their own) capacity to develop visual art skills and knowledge. If educators do not critically evaluate the educative value of an experience, activities may be justified only for their fun, mess or entertainment value. Materials will be limited in their quality and in their capacity to make meaningful rich marks and may also be excessively commercial or designed for one specific use. The scope for individual learning, growth and creative expression is diminished. The educator may be extremely hands-on in such activities, however their hands-on role will be to manage or even to make the item for children, particularly if the product has been selected as a class-wide thematic or seasonal product. Such activities seek to keep children busy and entertained, to meet perceived parent expectations or to satisfy the educator's desire to make a product for special events and celebrations. Toward this end of the continuum, the child is less visible in both process and product.

To label such activities as potentially stagnating may seem harsh. However, it is important to respectfully appreciate that educators perhaps make such choices because they lack confidence, skills and pedagogical content knowledge to teach visual art. It is possible that the myth of the corruptible child and the persistent preference for close-ended, process focussed activities remain firmly entrenched in early childhood educational contexts because unexamined mantras demand less of educators in the way of confronting their own art skills, beliefs and pedagogical knowledge development.

## CONCLUSION

Almost a century after Dewey advocated for artful pedagogies to support children's holistic learning and growth, the quality of visual art provision in early childhood contexts remains ambiguously undefined and highly contested. Children's experiences of art-making are determined not only by the activities and materials provided, in themselves driven by educator knowledge and beliefs, but also by the intersection of the pedagogical and personal beliefs of the educators who guide children with varying degrees of intentionality, support and engagement. This research shares the call by Ewing (2010) for both government and tertiary institutions to re-consider the pre-service training of educators in order to instil confidence to embed the visual arts in their teaching practices (p.55). In sharing the voices and experiences of the research participants along with Dewey's pedagogical challenges, it is hoped that this research will support early childhood educators to vicariously reflect upon, evaluate and determine their own visual art practice. The proposed continuum of visual art experience aims to equip early childhood educators with a reflective tool that may enable them to meet Dunn and Wright's (2015) charge to articulate and guarantee children's right to high quality art experiences. Rather than remaining bound by unexamined myths and mantras, educators will be supported to discern close-ended, mis-educative experiences that potentially lead to stagnation and to instead facilitate consummatory growth experiences. This aim was echoed by one research participant who urged that:

"Children should have a very wide range of visual art offerings or provocations over time... building up their skill and experience. Repeating experiences so that they can revisit, relax into them and refine what they're doing... it's really essential that children have lots of opportunity to transmit what and who they are into a visual form."

For this to occur, it is necessary for educators to be equipped to evaluate how their "own knowledge of the subject matter may assist in interpreting the child's needs and doings, and determine the medium in which the child should be placed in order that his growth may be properly directed" (Dewey, 1902, p.23). Such informed and aesthetically focussed educational guidance, advised Dewey (1902), frees "the life process for its most adequate fulfilment" (p.17) and may contribute "directly and liberally to an expanded and enriched life" (Dewey 1934, p. 27).

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