



Visual Arts Education: the potential for teacher delight
and despair

Art in Early Childhood

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ABSTRACT

The paper reports on Australian research with Early Childhood teachers reflecting in various ways on their preparation to teach areas across the curriculum, their perceptions of their ability to do so and their levels of confidence in teaching in these areas. The research contrasts the Visual and Performing Arts vis à vis the more traditional academic areas of the curriculum such as Literacy and Numeracy.

Preschool teachers were invited to respond to a mailed survey focussing on these issues together with a range of considerations pertinent specifically to the Visual Arts; they were also invited to indicate their willingness to participate in the next phase of the research. The subsequent stages of the study involved, firstly, an intensive interview with a selection of the participants and, secondly, a case study mentoring programme with three teachers exploring the possibilities of tailored support.

The research revealed critical gaps between preschool teachers' levels of ability, confidence and enjoyment which impacted significantly on their delivery of Visual Arts programmes which accords with the findings of national and international studies in relation to generalist primary teachers. Many of the early childhood teachers referred to the paucity and inadequacy of their initial teacher preparation for Visual Arts, compared with the perceived key areas of Literacy and Numeracy, and the dearth of subsequent professional learning opportunities.

The paper interrogates these disparities and explores teachers' specific concerns. In response to these concerns, a mentoring programme was developed and trialled in Australian preschools using only existing resources. Its efficacy as an individualized strategy suggests its strong potential for a broader but targeted professional development mentoring program.

INTRODUCTION

While it might seem almost platitudinous to assert that it is the teachers who are the heart of any vibrant Visual Arts program and that Visual Arts experiences are essential to the education of young children in the year before school, these fundamentals are threatened if teachers are fearful of the Visual Arts per se. While there is nothing new in the identification of art anxiety as a phenomenon amongst classroom teachers, attempts to ameliorate it have typically revolved around the acknowledgement of generalist primary teachers' lack of visual arts discipline

knowledge, aspirational references to the atelier model of Reggio Emilia, and the recognition of the dearth of relevant professional learning opportunities once teachers are in the field. This paper focuses on the early childhood level in Australia substantiating earlier data from the primary level and trialling a mentoring model to combat the negative impacts of art anxiety with individual teachers.

Genever's (1996) pioneering study in the Australian tertiary learning context "engagement in art practice and, in the case of pre-service teachers, having the potential to imperil and stunt their students' appreciation, understanding and practice of art. Subsequent published research following this micro study at the tertiary level reveals that the phenomenon identified by Genever (1996) is far more wide reaching and potentially devastating to Visual Arts learning than she had anticipated, e.g., Metcalf and Smith-Shank's (2001) US study.

More recently, sixty-five per cent of Hudson's (2006) Australian preservice teachers commented about their lack of confidence in art with 56 per cent of those noting that they lacked art skills and 22 per cent expressing concern because they 'could not draw'. Bailey and de Rijke (2014) seek ways for urban British university students to "overcome fears and anxieties related to art" citing a range of self-derogatory comments:

'I'm rubbish at Art! I'm just not creative'

'My sister's got the creative gene'

'I was not good at art at school ... I can't draw ... when I draw pictures, people don't know what they are' (np)

In the United States Marzilli Miraglia (2008) observes that "At the start of each semester, instructors of college art methods courses for preservice general education frequently hear the words 'I am not an artist. I can't draw'" and points out that "Drawing, painting, or art making in general can elicit strong feelings of self-doubt, low confidence, and anxiety in some preservice general education teachers". (p.53) She reports that the 18 preservice teacher participants in her study verbalized "... feelings of being nervous, frustrated, overwhelmed, uncomfortable, stressed, uneasy, worried, embarrassed, not worthy, afraid, intimidated, being inept, and self-conscious over the thought of participating in art activities"; they "did not consider themselves artistic". (Marzilli Miraglia 2008, p.57) As Green and Mitchell (1998) found in the UK context, this issue is compounded when preservice teachers experience the practicum:

Less than a third of the students in their final practice were able to learn from a class teacher's subject knowledge of art. In the interviews with 20 students in Phase Two we asked specifically about whether they felt they had learned from a class teachers' or specialists' subject knowledge in art. The findings were not encouraging as only three students felt that they learned from a class teacher and one from a subject specialist. [One commented that] 'I think she wasn't really an artist at all herself, and admitted that she did not like the arts at all and had had no training in the arts. She was rather pleased that I was there. 'Oh, good I've got a student, somebody who can do this [art work]'. (p. 250)

The Australian National Review of Visual Education (Davis, 2008) revealed high levels of anxiety and an expressed lack of confidence among teachers in Australian primary and secondary schools. Danko-McGhee's (2009) research with pre-service early childhood teachers in the US found that 95 per cent felt that they lacked artistic ability and creative skills; 90 per cent felt

that they had no ability to create an aesthetic environment. Gatt and Karppinen's (2014) cross cultural study of "the 'baggage' student teachers brought with them that could affect their future roles as arts or craft educators in the early childhood and primary school environment" (p.76) reported that, while 91 per cent of the University of Helsinki (UoH) and 85 per cent of the University of Malta (UoM) student teachers agreed or strongly agreed that they themselves were creative, half or more of each group (UoH – 58%; UoM – 50%) "considered they did not have the proper skills to teach arts and crafts". (Gatt and Karppinen, 2014, p. 82)

This problem of inadequate content knowledge is acknowledged internationally by Bresler (1992) – USA, Clement (1994) – UK, Green, Chedzoy, Harris, Mitchell, Naughton, Rolfe and Stanton (1998) – UK, Grauer (1999) – Canada, Paris (2006) – Australia and Boswell (2009) – NZ, suggesting the existence of a significant problem at least insofar as primary and secondary generalist teachers are concerned. Moreover, as Garvis and Pendergast (2010) note from their Australian research, beginning generalist teachers perceive the level of support from sources within the school to be minimal compared with that available for Literacy and Numeracy. Twigg and Garvis (2010) cite a comment from an early childhood lecturer colleague in Australia:

I recently visited a pre-service teacher engaged in practical experience at an early childhood centre in one of the major city centres in Australia. The children in the centre came from various socio-cultural backgrounds and were between the ages of 3-5 years. While there, I noticed the children were engaged in phonics lessons. I asked the supervising teacher what the general plan was for each day. She responded, 'Well we really have to concentrate on the children learning literacy. We have moved away from a play-based curriculum to a formal teaching approach'. I shivered on the insight. 'What about the Art?' I ask, 'Oh we did a little bit but not a lot. I don't really feel comfortable with the Art'. What was wrong? Frustrated, I picked up the phone and dialled a friend at a local kindergarten. I began telling my tale. 'But you don't understand', responded my friend. Her voice becomes stern. 'There is no professional development to help these teachers see why the arts are important. They have no one to collaborate or network with. Most of them leave university not knowing how to teach the art. They need help and direction if you want them to teach the art'. In one conversation, my question was answered. The problem was that some early childhood teachers did not have the knowledge or skills to teach the art. (pp.196 -197)

This anecdotal evidence suggested to us that the same might be true for pre-school teachers and, certainly, it is relatively common to see art displayed in preschools which does not reflect the individuality, creativity and active thinking of young children but rather, repetition, conformity and teacher domination. The prevalence of such dismal displays leads to questions about the teachers themselves and about how much they enjoy the Arts, what they know about teaching drawing, painting, modelling to young children and why they so often fall back on formulaic activities. Teaching is a challenging task and its effectiveness relies very much upon teachers having a sense of where they're heading and why they are headed there. What might be the direction and purpose of teachers who offer stencils and set activities as ART? What pressures might such preschool teachers be experiencing and what support might they need? Certainly there are issues which are familiar to generalist teachers of the Visual Arts:

Many teachers grapple with the conflicting imperatives of the curriculum, parental expectations, the place of the arts in our communities, and the need for addressing diversity. (Mc Ardle 2007: 53)

While these pressures are shared, the support preschool teachers require is varied and complex.

The question is how to design professional learning that addresses the concerns of many while providing individual assistance which respects differing sets of skills and needs.

SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

This question led to the current study which was designed to probe whether preschool teachers also experience a lack of confidence in teaching Visual Arts and to seek to ameliorate any lack of confidence in a cost effective and non-invasive way. The research project is located in Canberra where all children are offered preschool attendance of fifteen hours per week for forty weeks in the year before they go to school; the children are, mostly, four years old. The study aimed to find out from qualified teachers of young children how they were enjoying teaching Visual Arts, what Visual Arts experiences they were providing, what priority they gave to this teaching, what confidence they had in their ability to teach Visual Arts and how well prepared they were to teach it.

The study was designed in three phases. Phase One of the research consisted of a confidential mailed survey focussing on all curriculum areas together with a range of issues pertinent, specifically, to the Arts and yielded a 52 per cent response rate. The final survey question invited participants to indicate their willingness to take part in Phase Two and all except one expressed interest in participating. Ten teachers were subsequently selected at random for Phase Two which involved a one on one interview focussing in greater depth on issues raised by the survey and provided scope for probing more extensively each teachers' practices, philosophies and doubts. From the Phase Two participants, three were selected for a case study mentoring programme designed to allow each to develop a personal project to be conducted by each teacher in the context of regular collaboration, mentoring and support in their preschools.

RESULTS

In Phase One, data were sought in relation to the teachers' perceived levels of confidence in, ability in, and enjoyment of teaching across key learning areas.

Table 1 shows the survey participants' levels of confidence in teaching across learning areas.

Discrepancies in levels of teaching confidence are immediately apparent with 80 per cent of responses in the categories 'confident' and 'very confident' for Literacy and Numeracy as opposed to 30 per cent or less in the same categories for the Arts. The corollary of this is a response range across all four Arts categories of 12 to 25 per cent for 'not at all confident' and 30 to 35 per cent for 'somewhat confident'. The only areas in which respondents were 'Not at all confident' were Visual Arts, Music, Drama and Dance.

Table 2 shows participants' perceptions of their ability to teach across learning areas.

Perceptions of ability were often low to moderate despite the fact that all teachers surveyed reported at least two years preschool teaching experience and some as many as 30 years. In only one area, Literacy, did more than 20 per cent perceive their teaching ability to be 'Very high'. Responses to 'Little or no ability', 'Some ability' and 'Moderate ability' totalled 85 per cent across these categories for the teaching of Visual Arts.

LEARNING AREA	Not at all confident	Somewhat confident	Moderately confident	Confident	Very confident
	%	%	%	%	%
Literacy			19.23	42.30	38.46
Numeracy		3.85	15.38	50.00	30.76
Sustainability/ Science/ Environmental education		3.85	34.61	38.46	23.07
Visual Arts	11.53	30.76	19.23	23.07	7.69
Music	19.23	23.07	23.07	26.92	7.69
Drama	23.07	34.61	15.38	23.07	3.85
Dance	19.23	34.61	26.92	11.53	3.85
Physical health and well-being		11.53	30.76	38.46	15.38

Table 1 Levels of *confidence* in teaching preschool learning areas.

Table 3 profiles disparities between high/very high levels of confidence, perceived ability and enjoyment across the curriculum.

There is a clear mismatch between participants' perceptions of their ability and their levels of confidence and enjoyment in teaching. Literacy and Numeracy share a confidence level of 80 per cent (confident/ very confident) and a perceived ability level of 62 per cent (high/ very high ability) with the enjoyment level for Literacy exceeding that for Numeracy by 10 per cent. Across the Arts, however, enjoyment is higher in all areas than either confidence or perceived ability to teach. For all the creative arts, perceived ability ranges between 11 and 15 per cent, the level

LEARNING AREA	Little or no ability %	Some ability %	Moderate ability %	High ability %	Very high ability %
Literacy			38.46	38.46	23.07
Numeracy		3.85	34.61	50.00	11.53
Sustainability/ Science/ Environmental education		3.85	53.84	34.61	7.69
Visual Arts	7.69	30.76	46.15	11.53	3.85
Music	11.53	42.30	34.61	11.53	
Drama	7.69	34.61	42.30	15.38	
Dance	19.23	34.61	34.61	11.53	
Physical health and well-being		19.23	38.46	34.61	7.69

Table 2 Perceived *ability* levels in teaching in preschool learning areas

VISUAL ARTS	Level of confidence	Perceived ability	Enjoyment
	Confident/Very confident %	High/Very high %	High/Very high %
Drawing	34.60	19.23	61.53
Painting	34.61	15.38	76.91
Print-making	23.06	11.53	46.13
Sculpting/modelling	23.06	30.76	46.14
Ceramics/pottery	15.38	7.69	46.15
Construction/collage	38.45	19.23	57.69
Woodwork	11.54	7.69	38.46
Design	11.54	3.85	30.77

Table 3 Perceived levels of confidence, ability and enjoyment of teaching Visual Arts in ACT preschools

of confidence being highest for music, albeit only at 35 per cent, while enjoyment is highest for Visual Arts.

The second phase of the research offered the opportunity to probe these disparities individually and in greater depth through an intensive interview with each of ten teachers selected at random from the 96 per cent of survey participants who indicated their willingness to proceed to Phase Two. Interviews were held in their own preschools and teachers were encouraged to share their concerns and hopes. It became very clear that the gap between teachers' levels of ability, confidence and enjoyment had a significant impact on their delivery of a Visual Arts program. Many referred to the paucity and inadequacy of initial teacher preparation for Visual Arts compared with the perceived key areas of Literacy and Numeracy.

Only one of the teachers interviewed found delight in teaching Visual Arts. Some admitted ruefully that they 'did their best' but lamented that they lacked the necessary skills. Others acknowledged that they did not have any interest in the Arts but found 'ideas' for 'activities' which they assumed were appropriate. A number were unclear what was meant by Visual Arts and some were unable to distinguish between Art and Craft. One teacher said that she felt her skills to be so lacking that she felt sorry for the children she taught. Some, knowing that the project was designed to assist preschool teachers, made a personal plea for inclusion in the project to the extent that one wrote on her confidential survey paper: "Please help". Most alarmingly, the majority of teachers despaired about their lack of ability in the Arts and many also expressed guilt that they did not know how to teach Visual Arts.

Of the ten teacher interviewees, only one expressed any degree of confidence in teaching the Visual Arts, but that teacher expressed doubts about the general acceptability of her methods:

It's unusual for people to understand where I'm coming from, you know, like I've never been a photocopy teacher and I never will be.

None of the teachers expressed a clear direction in developing an educational program in the Visual Arts. This was surprising as, in this random group, two had been awarded the distinction of being recipients of the Teacher of the Year award from the large Public Education sector. Hence these teachers were in no way incompetent practitioners but were nevertheless stultified

in their teaching of the Visual Arts by a crippling lack of confidence and the undermining knowledge that each lacked a basic understanding of an educational framework for teaching Visual Arts. Overall, their comments reflect a dual sense of confusion and despair:

I'm ad hoc so I don't have a clear vision of what I'd like to achieve so it's about ... grabbing anything I can get at the time.

I am very isolated and I know who I am as a teacher and I know that I can go with it but some of the ideas are impractical.

Sometimes I feel very alone and isolated in my beliefs.

I just don't think I teach it well enough to my own standards and I think I do children a disservice by not having that knowledge.

I'm shocking; I don't have many skills in that area. I'm not an artist at all.

I don't feel I have skills in any of those areas where, you know, what I think I bring is that I have an aesthetic eye and so I am able to present materials to children in an unwitting way but I've never actually done any art-making myself.

Generally the teachers perceived critical lacks in their pre-service preparation:

I learnt a lot about the Arts but I didn't actually learn how to teach it and that's worried me.

Because of the way the course was structured I've never actually done a subject called 'Visual Arts'... I've never done any subject related to Visual Arts. It's only what I've picked up along the way so that sort of limits things.

It wasn't really deep; it was too quick for the... I would rather have had more 'hands on'... the recipes they gave us were too short: 'This is how you work with clay'; 'This clay may cause asthma' – really, really fast and then it was gone.

In my training we did just one art unit and that's it.

One teacher referred to her training in Visual Arts as adequate but nevertheless admitted her current practice was shameful. In terms of support, there appeared to be almost no professional learning taking place which was relevant to the Visual Arts. On the other hand, there was evidence of an escalating dependence on outside experts and institutions such as galleries and museums to deliver art experiences which, while often high quality, were isolated occurrences and could not constitute an integrated program of learning, visual awareness and skill development:

Currently we're talking about love and the children are doing lots of their representations of love through art – drawing and through clay – and I'm thinking 'If I had an image, a conceptual image to base some more extension on, that would be fantastic'. I feel as though I need an artist by my side.

Overall a *cri de coeur* characterized the teachers' sense of their needs and hopes:

I'd like someone to come in and work with us ... someone to actually say, "Have you considered this?"

My problem is I can talk to someone but you need to actually be putting it in your classroom.

I guess it's someone to talk about these things so it's what worked for them and what hasn't; where do they get the resources and how do they actually put it together so that it worked well, do you know what I mean? Someone with experience, I guess, or maybe a resource – either a book or an internet site – something like that – where you can go and have a look at what other people have done and with it in action before you actually delve in to it yourself.

The overwhelming sense of inchoate need expressed by these ten teachers in their own idiosyncratic ways meant that all would have benefited from selection for the third mentoring phase of the project. In the end the three teachers were chosen to represent a geographical spread across the city, a range of ages and years of teaching and a variety of professional and personal objectives:

The researcher – mentor worked with each teacher for about one hour per week or fortnight over a three month period, visiting at a time and location of the teacher's choice. Together they identified challenges, clarified goals, reported progress, recognised limitations, adjusted programs, checked stores, evaluated materials and equipment, designed new playroom settings, created art exhibitions with the children, talked with school principals, staff, parents and children and decided how to proceed. On rare occasions the researcher - mentor stayed with the children and worked with them but, mostly, the teacher gave up some of her preparation time to discussion and they met in a quiet staff room. The teachers nominated their own goals or directions and were free to change/modify these or to leave the project.

The role of the researcher-mentor evolved over the duration of each case study but focussed consistently around listening, questioning, challenging, coaching, suggesting, encouraging and sharing experiences in teaching Visual Arts; the teachers investigated and shared the dilemmas of their current situation. It was very important that the researcher-mentor was not the 'expert'; neither was she a colleague but rather an 'outsider' with a passion for the Arts who enjoyed working with the three very keen and honest teachers and delighting in their progress. The focus was always on the teacher and her work with the children who delighted the adults with their responses and progress.

The results of this phase were truly exciting not only for the teacher participants but also for the researcher – mentor in realising a new and different model of professional development. Initial expectations were that progress would be slow but the teachers 'flew'. These indicative quotations from their journals reflect their burgeoning optimism:

[I] have amazingly realised how art is accessible to everyone and it is a wonderful way of building confidence in so many children.

You really do need these professional discussions away from the pressures of work.

This part of the journey is over but it is definitely not the end.

I think the whole project has been an amazing professional experience – through discussion – simple explorations have been able to be developed and become cross curricula explorations.

I had a one-woman cheer-leader.

CONCLUSION

The trial was successful for all three teachers who have expressed the wish to continue in an extended mentoring program. There have also been two additional but unexpected outcomes: Firstly, the children in those 3 preschools are now immersed in programs of Visual Arts appropriate to their age and experience and, secondly, the three teachers, who all belong to the ACT Preschool Teachers' Professional Association, have shared their enthusiasm widely so that the Association is now conducting workshops for preschool teachers using professional artists who have appropriate experience in, and knowledge of, working with young children.

The strategy of encouraging each teacher to articulate a preferred goal, and mentoring the pathway of each teacher as she explored and navigated towards the goal, was highly effective – suggesting it as a new model of professional learning to be probed and researched further. Traditional professional learning opportunities for teachers post initial training tend to be reactive to opportunity – a visiting guru is shared; a teaching colleague has time to pass on some 'good ideas' - or they derive from the need to initiate teachers into the intricacies of curriculum change and innovation. In some case it provides a forum for acculturation into institutional or policy change. Rarely does it derive from a grass roots analysis of either collective or individual needs.

The aforementioned National Review of Visual Education (Davis, 2008) reported that, despite 'centres of excellence' in schools and preschools, the state of the Visual Arts in Australian schools was not healthy. The results of the current study, albeit from a small and specific location base, suggest strongly that these findings about Visual Arts Education in primary and secondary schools are almost certainly likely also to apply to Early Childhood Education. Further, the current study points to a yawning chasm between the fundamental needs of preschool teachers and current professional teaching/learning practices. Teachers acknowledged that, while there was often intellectual stimulation to be derived from professional learning inputs, these did not even begin to intersect with their needs. The case study participants shared the problem of Arts anxiety, a sense of personal ignorance about the Visual Arts and a consequent lack of confidence in their ability to create and deliver a Visual Arts program. Yet, for each, the pathway out of their shared dilemma was very different. There is no way that an individual entering their space with a pre-prepared remedial strategy would have been efficacious.

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