Let’s address low visual arts self-efficacy

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VISUAL arts pedagogy and the place of visual arts in the curriculum are determined by the collision of teachers’ visual arts self-efficacy beliefs, pedagogical beliefs about children’s learning processes and visual arts content knowledge. Recent research has found that educators with limited visual arts knowledge, developmentally limiting beliefs about children’s capacity for visual arts learning and low visual arts self-efficacy were more likely to abdicate the role of planning for and teaching visual arts to a colleague they consider to be ‘more arty’ than themselves. When that was not possible, rather than present open-ended visual arts learning experiences using a range of quality visual arts media and processes, some research participants selected close-ended, mass-produced, teacher-directed arts activities perceived to be entertaining and easy to implement.

Low visual arts self-efficacy amongst teachers impacts the beliefs and capacity of the next generation to explore ideas and communicate through visual and graphic languages. Indeed, the very education system that should be opening doors for children to access and embrace learning through multiple intelligences, including visual arts appreciation and making, is tragically the very context in which many people stop believing that they are artistic or creative. It is ironic that while most teachers readily espouse the belief that artistic and cultural experiences are important for children, many of these same teachers concurrently state that they are not personally artistic or creative. They mistakenly position artistic ability as a somehow naturally developing skill that few people are lucky enough to acquire. Perhaps such beliefs comfortably fort teachers lacking confidence in their own visual arts knowledge and capacity to teach visual arts skills? After all, if visual arts abilities supposedly develop by chance, perhaps the abdication of intentional teaching is even more excusable?

Low visual arts self-efficacy beliefs often stem from childhood and schooling experiences. Perhaps you recall only doing art as a smorgasbord of production-line templates on Friday afternoons? Or, perhaps like many adults, you can vividly recall the moment when a carelessly placed criticism forever damaged your visual arts self-confidence? John Dewey identified the power of ‘collateral learning,’ where the development of future attitudes and desires for learning are profoundly strengthened or weakened by experience. He writes that if the desire for learning is compromised, “The pupil is actually robbed of an ability which otherwise would enable him to cope with the circumstances that he meets in the course of his life.”

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 31) states that children of all ages have the right to both access and fully participate in cultural and artistic life. If we truly aim to nurture and educate the next generation of holistic thinkers, communicators and problem solvers we must value, model and teach visual arts learning, attitudes and confidence. To support personal and pedagogical reflection, teachers might consider the following questions:

• Do I value the visual arts in my teaching and curriculum planning?
• Are visual arts learning experiences integrated across the curriculum as a tool by which children are supported to explore, make meaning and express ideas?
• Are one-off arts and crafts activities only scheduled once a week as a therapeutic and fun activity to give children a ‘break’ from the learning domains I think are valuable or cognitively demanding?
• Do the visual arts learning experiences offered provide children with opportunities to access and appreciate the work of practicing artists and to progressively learn a range of skills and techniques?
• Do I join children in the art-making process as both co-learner and co-teacher of arts skills and techniques?
• Are the experiences I routinely offer selected to avoid mess and parent complaints about stained uniforms?
• Do the visual arts products children create in my classroom show evidence of child choice and individual expression or do the children in my classroom make identical reproductions of template-guided, Pinterest-inspired activities?
• How will I foster and build my own visual arts knowledge, skills and confidence?

Let’s talk about children’s rights and the role of visual arts in the curriculum.

The child is the foundation of the next generation. It is therefore most important that teachers examine their own visual arts self-efficacy and appreciate that their personal visual arts experiences, attitudes and consequentially pedagogical choices will in turn influence their students’ visual arts learning, attitudes and confidence. If we truly aim to nurture and educate the next generation of holistic thinkers, communicators and problem solvers we must value, model and teach visual arts learning, attitudes and confidence.

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