CHALLENGING EDUCATOR BELIEFS AND MISBELIEFS

To experience the joy of playing with art making is a human right that should not be denied (Rinaldi, 2006).

Few early childhood educators would disagree or say that children's visual arts development and expression does not matter. Art materials and processes are central to daily practice in most early childhood settings and the benefits of visual arts engagement are widely accepted. Yet, it is very common to hear early childhood teachers and educators (and the wider population) express the belief that they are not personally artistic (Lindsay, 2015; 2016). When I explain that my PhD research explored the visual arts beliefs and pedagogy of early childhood educators, the most common response is comments about the importance of the research topic, quickly followed by self-conscious statements such as, "Oh, but I am not artistic", or "I don't have a creative bone in my body".

When educators lack visual arts confidence, instead of equipping children with a rich vocabulary of visual arts methods and techniques, it seems that visual arts provisions remain an ever-changing, Pinterest-informed smorgasbord of 'keep-them-entertained-and-busy' activities. It is ironic that educators, who routinely support children to learn and develop new skills through experience, intentional teaching and practice, regularly leave children's visual art development to chance. This avoidance of modelling and teaching jeopardises children's capacity to joyfully make and express meaning in visual ways, both now and into the future. Scholars affirm that teachers who lack knowledge about visual arts methods and processes, and who deny their own artistic skills, are more likely to provide materials to children, while avoiding direct engagement with children to intentionally teach visual arts skills (Eckhoff, 2012; McArdle, 2013).
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My research with early childhood educators found that negative personal beliefs about the capacity to make art are often based in the belief that truly artistic people can draw realistically. Those who defined themselves as ‘not artistic’ either believed that the capacity to draw and to be ‘artistic’ was a special gift they had somehow missed out on. Most recalled prior experiences that undermined their self-belief. Adding to the problem, few participants remembered anything from their pre-service training that had helped them to overcome their lack of visual arts confidence. Apart from gathering a list of arts activity ideas and being told that process is more important than product, the participants’ memories of visual arts coursework content were vague or non-existent. When beliefs are formed early they can be resistant to change and even to schooling and experience (Pajares, 2011).

My research suggests that to transform visual arts pedagogy for children, we need to shift the mindsets, attitudes and beliefs of educators. I propose that we must not only teach educators the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of visual arts pedagogy, or simply present them with a shopping list of arts activity ideas. We must address the ‘why’ and the ‘who’ of visual arts pedagogy, or simply present them with a shopping list of arts activity ideas. We must address the ‘why’ and the ‘who’ of visual arts pedagogy in order to inform theoretical appreciation for the vital role of the educator in fostering children's visual arts learning. In my work with pre-service teachers, I initially implement a range of practical drawing experiences designed to deconstruct their often strongly-held belief that they are not artistic. This is not done to glorify realistic drawing, but to disrupt assumptions about how people develop artistic skills. Through hands-on drawing experiences that explicitly teach observational drawing skills, students are often amazed to realise how quickly they can learn to draw realistically, simply by being taught the skill of transferring what they observe onto paper. This is followed by immersion in a range of meaningful experiences with a range of visual arts methods and techniques. This process supports our future early childhood teachers to reconstruct a new image of themselves and children as artists, researchers and teachers. It fuels the liberating notion that learning visual arts skills and techniques is no different to learning skills in any domain.

Inspired by the participants in my study who overcame their own lack of visual arts confidence by adopting constructivist approaches to pedagogy, such as those exemplified in Reggio Emilia, the pre-service teachers are challenged to exercise an image of the child and themselves as competent and capable. Visual arts methods are positioned as languages that can be intentionally scaffolded through modeling, co-learning and co-teaching. To genuinely enact a strong value for the rights and capabilities of the child will result in visual arts pedagogy that is child-centred, complex, open-ended, authentic and empowering.

References