

ECEs' Perceptions on the Role of Visual Arts in Pre-K Children's Learning

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Abstract

Visual arts is one of many arts-related activities in which children participate in the early learning and care environments. Literature finds that early childhood educators who are not familiar with visual arts struggle to provide opportunities for children to engage in a more comprehensive experience. The purpose of this research is to understand the way educators perceive the role of visual arts in pre-k children's learning. Through a qualitative method, four early childhood educators share their role in visual arts practice with children and their personal views and experiences relating to the subject in a semi-structured interview. Grounded theory method was used to analyze the data, which revealed that being co-passionate and having an open-minded approach to visual arts were ways that educators perceive the role of the subject in children's learning. For future research, it is recommended to further examine more participants' perceptions and experiences to reveal in-depth understanding of the subject's nature in early learning. With further resources and research on the subject, this can provide further opportunities, space, and abilities for educators' to provide children quality-based art experiences.

Introduction

The research topic focuses on the subject of visual arts experiences in early learning settings. Visual arts is commonly present in the early learning environment and is a form of children's play, however the problem is on the lack of comprehensive information found on visual arts practice, especially from resources used by early childhood educators such as How Does Learning Happen and ELECT documents. Literature finds that "early childhood teachers lacking significant understandings of visual arts media, methods, and related pedagogy will inevitably struggle to support comprehensive early arts experiences in the classroom." (Eckhoff, 2012, p. 365). The problem could affect the way educators' value and perceive the subject, thus the objective of this study, is to bring awareness on how visual arts is being perceived, and its' overall impact in the field. This leads to the purpose of the research study, to understand the ECEs' role and views of visual arts in pre-k children's learning, and the main research question used for the study is on, "How do ECEs perceive the role of visual arts in pre-k children's learning?"

Literature Review

Literature presents two major key themes, views on visual arts and experiences of visual arts. According to How Does Learning Happen (2014), every child is capable of communicating about himself or herself in many ways, and for those many ways to happen, the educators are the ones to understand how conversations can be shown in various forms of expression and to foster those forms of expression (p. 24). Although it is indicated in HDLH that conversations take place in various forms of expression, there is a lack of detail on HDLH with directions on how educators could foster those forms of expression through children's visual art experiences. An in-classroom observational study done in the U.S. found that a professional artist working within the ECE classroom encouraged children to move past beyond teacher-directed craft activities, as they were given more time to look, explore, appreciate, and question their art-making process, as well as, allowing children to challenge expectations of visual arts experiences in the classroom (Eckhoff, 2012, p.371). Furthermore, literature finds that educators' restrictive views on visual arts limits children's opportunities with ways they could explore art materials and develop their own views of visual arts. For instance, in a qualitative study based in Turkey examined pre-service educators' views and approaches about children's artworks noted that the educators often preferred having the classroom tidy, which was indicated as a limitation with how much paint and art supplies children could freely explore with (Yildiz and Coban, 2019, p. 141). Adding on, a study based in the U.S used ethnographic methods on collecting data from children's perceptions and experiences with art, found that teachers' preference of certain aesthetics and experiences with directed arts and crafts limited how much children could do with art, and with the way children viewed visual arts (Malin, 2013, p. 15). Educators are considered to be co-constructors and co-learners with children as they are exploring and testing out their views and influences (How does learning happen, 2014, p. 16). An Irish qualitative study found that an artist approach with supporting educators in visual arts activities, encouraged educators and children to fully explore and engage through the art-making process, not on the basis of end-product (Hayes et al, 2017, p. 216). Importantly, literature suggests that a more holistic view of early arts experiences with supportive pedagogical practices should be in place for educators to feel more equipped with how they experience a quality-based visual arts practice (Eckhoff, 2012, p. 371). Therefore, the 'views' and 'experiences' of educators are core foundation that researchers have found with understanding visual arts' role in the early learning settings.

Methodology

Research Design

The methodology chosen for this research is qualitative, and the research findings are described through a narrative design. The chosen method only includes a semi-structured interview, where questions are structured around their role as an educator in children's visual arts experiences, and their own personal views and experiences with the subject matter. The semi-structured interview is designed to ensure that participants can provide a range of personal stories, experiences and discussion behind the reasoning of their views (Creswell, 2012, p. 502). As the rationale for the chosen method is based upon the lived experiences of each participant, the questions created under each sub-topic are found to be open-ended, and as well as focused on the main subject matter of the research study.

Instrument

The interview was semi-constructed and consisted with questions that revolved around their role as an educator in children's visual arts experiences, and their own personal experiences and views of visual arts. Since the interview is semi-structured, the questions would be phrased differently and included some probing questions to continue with the narrative style dialogue. Importantly, no questions were completely far from the points being asked in each sub-topic. The amount of time that each participant took on their interview lasted differently. Participant 1 lasted for 18 minutes, Participant 2 and Participant 3 lasted for about 35 minutes, and Participant 4 lasted for 16 minutes.

Participants

Two participants found are currently working in public schools and two other participants have previously worked in private and Montessori childcare and learning settings. All 4 participants have working experiences with children in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten age groups.

Procedure

During the recruitment process, convenience sampling was used to locate 5 childcare and early learning centers in the Toronto region in order to recruit any early childhood educators who are available and interested to participate. Only 2 out of 5 contacted childcare agencies responded to the recruitment email stating that the agency are interested with forwarding the email to their staff members. However, no educators were presently available at that time to go forth with the interview. Instead, snowball sampling was used in regards to recruiting participants. The study included 4 early childhood educators that were recruited based on a referral made from peers and professors at the college. The procedure for analyzing data relied on grounded theory method. The purpose of grounded theory is to ensure that the responses received from participants' are analyzed without any influences from pre-mature ideas of the topic, as well as, avoiding any personal bias of the topic. Therefore, this method allows the researcher to analyze information that is 'atypical' and unexpected from what is known so far about the topic.

The data analysis began with open coding, large chunks of information were gathered based on seeing similar patterns that appear in each participants' response. Pattern-like information are coded based on related-emotions and feelings, and similar phrases used throughout the text. With that, in the axial coding phase, key components were identified based on the relationships found among the several codes. Adult-interactions with art making experiences, sense of identity and passion, creative arts, abilities and skills, and competence were the key components found from analyzing the data. Finally, on the selective coding phase, based on the relationships of the five categories created, two major themes emerged for discussion of the results, 'being co-passionate' and 'open-minded approach to art'.

Results

Being co-passionate is one out of the two key themes found from analyzing the data. Participants described about a sense of passion and identity. Participant 1 mentioned in the interview about children's perspective of art, "Pure, and very special, and unique. I will become artist while the child told me....Art is like the artist". Participant 2 states "I love dancing, I also love to act, I like drama. I am amazing at it....It's how I express myself...It comes natural to you. Something you're crazy passionate about. Participant 3 states "I'm an observer....I see their mouth moving, and their eyes, like you know, glistening, so engaged in it. When they look up around, I come in and go to their level, and really acknowledge their work..." Participant 3 also states, "All that experiences, just creates a character of who you are and who I am...Building relationships with every unique child." When asked about participant's own personal idea and views on visual arts, participant 4 states "it goes beyond just a picture on a paper, it could hold their feelings or it could hold mentally how they're processing something." An open-minded approach to art-making was resulted from the data analysis, all four participants described the theme with ideas on children's competence and creativity in art. Participant 1 described that art is "whatever you think, whatever you imagine. Participant 3 stated visual arts being more evolved than what it used to be, she said "there's so much more to visual arts. Art is tangible, something you can physically touch and see. Over the years the definition probably changed, I'm hoping that it did. Art has evolved." In addition, participants also describe about children's competence towards art-making. Participant 1 explains how children feel welcome to do art in own ways, such as through food and using hands. Adding on, participant 4's approach to children's art is following children's lead, and create the way they would like for their artworks. The theme on being co-passionate came from the ideas discussed by participants about adult interactions with children's art making experiences, children and early childhood educators' own sense of passion and identity, and as well as, open-minded/creative arts. Open minded approach to art-making experiences was based on ideas by educators' experiences in the field with children's competence towards art-making, and as well as, using the term 'creative'.

Discussion

The study finds that both participants explained how they were not interested in visual arts, but they both share an interest in art-related activities that they feel extremely passionate of. Participant 2 said "I don't feel like I am the best drawer....So, me personally, I love dancing. I also love to act, I like drama. When you bring drama and dance together, I am amazing at it...And it shows a lot more to me than drawing or painting." Participant 3 said "My first dream that I ever wanted to be was an actress" when speaking about her childhood experiences relating to arts. All participants state at some point in their interview about creativity, such as participant 1 stating "Some children, they are really creatively". Furthermore, participant 4 describes in further detail about creativity where she states "visual arts entail a number of things...wanting to recreate is a form of art...something that is creative...it can be a number of things....not just a drawing". Also, Participant 3 shares similar ideas with Participant 4 on a more open-minded approach to the way people think about visual arts. Participant 3 mentioned "I do hope that from what I grew up believing visual arts is just like art with a pencil and paper that evolves into many different areas." Although literature finds that "early childhood teachers lacking significant understanding of visual arts media, methods, and related pedagogy will inevitably struggle to support comprehensive early arts experiences in the classroom." It can be argued that based on the participants' responses, it suggests otherwise that educators who are attentive to children's expression in their art, and with continuous encouragement and support provides onto ways of creating a comprehensive early arts experiences. As participant 4 states "It doesn't matter if you have a good voice or if you can draw a perfect circle or a perfect figure, what you need to do is just do your best because that's what the kids appreciate... you feel secure enough in your own self to laugh along with them and encourage them to try something..." However, it is to note that participant 4 stated at some point of the interview that she personally loves art, but also she does not practice art nor feel at ease to do 'natural or realistic art'. Literature also suggests that "teachers see themselves as co-researchers with the children, and listen acutely to the ideas the children bring to the learning environment." (Pohio, 2017, p. 11). Similarly, participant 3 explained how she observes the children's engagement in their art-making and asks questions about children's feelings and how to express meanings and ideas on their creations, as well as, participant 2 suggests that parents should take the time to engage with children's art, as this can take a long way in their childhood.

Conclusion

The study implies that early childhood educators perceive the role of visual arts in children's learning through being co-passionate and having a more open-minded approach to children's art-making, that even with participants' little to non-existent interest in visual arts, educators still react towards children's art positively, and seeing art as more than just traditional drawings, but 'evolutionary' and creative-based. However, there were a few limitations faced in this study. A constricted time line was in place with recruitment, collection of data and data analysis, thus only 4 participants were contributed for this study. The study is based on a single qualitative method, therefore it could not be methodologically triangulated, along with the sample size being significantly small, no generalizations were made. For future research, having more participants contributed in similar art-related studies could increase awareness of the art-related subjects in the early childhood education field, as it could be further contributed into curriculum and expert documents. With an increase of resources and research on the subject, this can provide further opportunities, space, and abilities for educators' to give quality opportunities for children to experience with art. Importantly, this research can further encourage educators to critical think about how their perceptions on the subject may affect the way they deliver art experiences for children.

Results Chart

