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## VISUAL ARTS EDUCATION AND THE DIVERSE PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES OF KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS



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### Abstract

The objective of the study was to examine current pedagogical practices in Finnish early childhood education. Our purpose was to cast light on how kindergarten teachers implement visual arts education in day-care environments. Finnish kindergarten teachers become qualified through two routes: bachelor studies in educational sciences at university or bachelor studies in social services at universities of applied sciences. We gathered qualitative data by interviewing five kindergarten teachers in five day-care centres in the Helsinki metropolitan area during the spring of 2014. The data were analysed qualitatively on the basis of themes, and the results were reduced to reveal the variation underlying the data. Through these findings we constructed two approaches to visual arts education, naming them the “instrumentally focused approach” and “art-focused approach”. We hope that the study will help in designing better curricula for BA studies for future kindergarten teachers at both types of universities. We also hope we have provided new insights into the question of what high-quality visual arts education in early childhood is.

*Keywords:* Visual arts, early childhood education, cultural education, professional identity

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## **1. Introduction**

This article focuses on the professional diversity of kindergarten teachers and on practices in visual arts education in early childhood education. As researchers and senior lecturers, we reflect the results of our current research project which has involved co-operation in the field of visual arts education between three organizations: the Laurea University of Applied Sciences, Metropolia University of Applied Sciences and University of Helsinki.

In Finland, kindergarten teachers are responsible for children up to the age of six. Qualification as a kindergarten teacher is gained in two ways: university bachelor studies in pedagogical teacher training or bachelor studies in social services at universities of applied sciences. BA studies in social services do not include pre-school teacher qualification, and in practice, this means that as kindergarten teachers they work with children under the age of six.

Early childhood education takes place mainly within the framework of the public day-care system, which is seen as having a double mission. Firstly, the day-care is meant to allow parents to participate in the labour market and to support them in the upbringing of their children. Secondly, day-care should support the balanced development of the child's personality (Act on Children's Day-Care 1973). In recent years a significant change has taken place in Finnish early childhood education, one which has seen the drafting, administration and steering of legislation governing early childhood education and care eventually transferred in 2013 from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health to the Ministry of Education and Culture.

The current educational goals are defined in the national document "Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland" (CGECEC) (National Institute for Health and Welfare 2003/2005). The CGECEC document serves as a basis for local (meaning municipal) curricula, and for the curricula implemented in day-care centres. The CGECEC document mentions the forms of visual arts education – drawing and painting – as part of aesthetic orientation. It also describes the significance of artistic activities and experiences with respect to the growth, development and learning of the child. Art and artistic experiences are seen as a part of the value system, and artistic expression as conducive to the wellbeing of the child. Wellbeing is presented as one of the central goals of all early childhood education.

The cultural role of the educator is presented as one of cooperating with cultural organizations. According to the CGECEC document, early childhood education should ensure that children can develop an aesthetic and cultural relationship with their

environment. Moreover, children should be given an opportunity to express themselves creatively. Visual arts education is presented as an element of aesthetic orientation, which also includes other forms of art such as music, drama, children's literature, dance and crafts. Early childhood educators can choose the quality and amount of visual arts education they want to offer in practice. There are no normative regulations concerning goals, the content of subjects or the educational development of the child: the scope is wide and loose (see Collanus, Kairavuori, & Rusanen 2012).

## **2. Problem Statement**

The inspiration for this research project was a survey focused on kindergarten teachers in day-care centres in the Helsinki metropolitan area. According to the survey, kindergarten teachers with a BA degree in educational sciences found the definition of themselves "as implementors of children's culture and arts education" to be an essential part of their professional identity. There was a statistically significant difference between them and kindergarten teachers with a BA degree in social services. Less than half of the BAs in social services found this definition as applying to themselves (Onnismaa, Tahkokallio, Reunamo, & Lipponen 2013). As well, other recent research (Varhaiskasvatuksen koulutus Suomessa 2013) has assumed that these two focuses, one on educational pedagogy and the other on social pedagogy, influence the professional competence of early childhood educators.

The present study focuses on the professional competence of kindergarten teachers. How do they implement visual arts education in early childhood education in day-care environments? In addition, we aim to gain an understanding of how the different educational backgrounds of kindergarten teachers affect their practices in visual arts education.

## **3. Research Questions**

The article focuses on visual arts education practices. We ask how kindergarten teachers implement visual arts education in day-care environments.

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

The objective of the study is to reflect current pedagogical practices. Our purpose is to shed light on how visual arts education is implemented in early childhood education in Finland.

At the outset of the project our aim was to critically look behind the results of recent research describing significant differences between the professional identities of kindergarten

teachers. We hoped to illuminate how the backgrounds of different kinds of professional education affect the practices of visual arts education. However, when analysing the research data we faced limitations in answering this question. We found variations in the professional identity of the kindergarten teachers as visual arts educators, but it was difficult to identify the effects of the different kinds of professional backgrounds in the data. What appeared to matter more was the length of ones working history, the kind of continuing training one has, and the role of art in one's own life. Educational background as well as working history and personal life was seen to be associated with one's expertise as a visual arts educator. Both also influence how the conceptions of art and the child are constructed (see also Grauer, 1998).

## **5. Research Methods**

Theme interviews and observation were used to collect the data in the spring of 2014. Five kindergarten teachers were interviewed in day-care centres in the Helsinki metropolitan area. The interviewees had been working at least two years in day-care centres which implement the CGECEC guidelines. Two of the informants had a degree from the University of Helsinki, two had a degree from the Laurea University of Applied Sciences and one had graduated from the Metropolia University of Applied Sciences.

The interviewers photographically documented the learning environment and the artefacts made by the children during visual arts education. The recorded interviews and observations were transcribed. The amount of written research material was approximately 50 pages. The research data were analysed through qualitative content analysis, and through themes that were used in the interviews (education and work history, conceptions of children, conceptions of art, educational views) and observations (visual arts practices). The results of the analysis were reduced to reveal the variation underlying the data.

The trustworthiness of this research is guaranteed by ensuring the credibility of the research process (see Lincoln & Cuba 1985). As researchers we designed the interview frame in co-operation but made the interviews crossed: we did not interview our own former students. The interview questions were asked in various ways in each interview. Thus, the findings refer also to interaction between the interviewers and the interviewees, while the observations and documented photos in the data widen the scope and add credibility. Our position as researchers has been taken into account when interpreting the data. Three different approaches and perspectives on art education created a fruitful base for critical analysis and the interpreting process. The reflective discussions were an important way of guaranteeing credibility, as was participating in two national arts education research

seminars where we gathered peer feedback on our research. This has been used when interpreting the data, and has resulted in greater awareness and a wider context for our own views.

## **6. Findings**

After asking what kind of visual arts education practices appear in early childhood education, we continued by asking what is good-quality visual arts education – how can it be described. The idea of success was emphasized in the interview material: significantly, all interviewees thought it was important to provide visual arts activities that foster children's feelings of success and that there were different ways to do so. On the basis of these findings we identified two approaches to visual arts education, naming them instrumentally focused and art-focused. These two approaches were not individually evident in the interview data. The findings, as we saw them, describe the educational reality and the presence of art in the researched day-care centres.

In the instrumentally focused visual arts education approach the kindergarten teacher's role is to ensure that children can practise their motor skills, for example when using scissors and colouring books. Good motor skills lead to more success in the pre-school milieu, and later on as well. Skillful children can also be given more freedom in their activities because they need less of an educator's support. The educator's role then becomes one of supplying the materials, tools, models, etc. The focus in art education is on crafting, drawing and developing motor skills through "tablework", working at a table with standard paper.

Bringing artwork home and showing it to parents is taken into consideration, while drawing is seen as the "pedagogy of sitting", and small children's drawing merely as scribbling. Connections to children's wider psychomotor development remain unseen. When an educator's own experience making art is limited it is difficult to support visual arts development in children. Two suggestions have been made to solve this problem. One is to broaden teachers' art education skills through continuing education courses organized in one's own day-care centre. Another is to use collegial support as well as the internet to find ideas and models to apply in art sessions. Children's feelings of success arise from concrete artwork and the positive feedback they receive from the surrounding community. Ensuring success may sometimes mean not working according to the models, but actually not reaching the desired objective might also be a disappointment. Art activities which are familiar and easy are the most rewarding for the child.

In the art- focused visual arts education approach the child's feeling of success can be achieved through promoting his/her own activity, playfulness and experimentation. Here the educator's enthusiasm and openness to children's initiatives are vital, with a key task being to maintain an inspiring and meaningful setting. The activities are based on the children's experiences, experiments and feelings of success. They are grounded in a continuum of themes and processes, and positive feedback is emphasized. The child is enough as such, and the educator understands children and their situations. The art itself is a way to face the surrounding world. The child's own activity and freedom to choose directions during certain phases of the process are emphasized. Long-term processes are fostered and connections are made with different CGECEC orientations. The different forms of art are integrated in multiple ways.

In this approach the educator actively follows visual arts and cultural happenings as a participant but from time to time as a promoter. Children's activities are bonded to the visual arts and visual culture, which is followed through in excursions. Children's feelings of success arise from their inner freedom to experiment and express themselves, and, as with the instrumentally focused approach, from the positive feedback they receive from the surrounding community.

All in all, the role of a visual arts educator is to promote children's feelings of success, and both approaches can lead to meaningful results. Nevertheless, we perceived a contradiction between the interview and observational material concerning both uniform and creative expression. The interviewees stated that children should be encouraged in terms of their own artistic expression rather than working according to models. However, many traces of uniform expression appeared during the observations. The verbalized ideological level and observed practical level seemed to conflict. In addition, the conception of "crafting" was mentioned a number of times by the interviewees. Thus, the educators' views appeared to be coloured by a strong assumption that art and craft go together, and even have the same meaning.

The visual environment of the day-care centres consisted of children's artwork, colouring books and material partly produced by the educators. Some children's book illustrations were observed on the walls, but little artwork. A positive aspect was that the visual culture surrounding the children was created by the children themselves. The choice of subjects and themes, however, was largely provided by the educators. It is perhaps more accurate to say that the visual culture found in the researched day-care centres was the children's interpretation of matters that the educators thought were important.

Both of these contradictions seem to be connected to the *instrumentally focused visual arts education approach*. Further, it seems that the approach parallels the phenomenon which Arthur Efland (1976) saw as characterizing visual arts education at school and which he named the “school art style”. This phenomenon can also be seen in preschool and day-care environments according to research by Patricia Tarr (1989; 1995) indicating that the connections between visual arts activities in day-care education and the world of art itself are tenuous. Recent research concerning visual arts education (see e.g. Kindler 2010; Cozens 2013; Hayiannis 2013) has concluded that many alternatives are available to traditional early childhood art activities. Important is that the aim is to construct connections to the world of art in multiple ways.

Even though the connections to the art domain seemed thin in the *instrumentally focused approach*, visual arts was mentioned as a cultural activity of the children. For its part, there were traces of diverse ways of understanding art in *the art-focused approach*. In this approach, art involves skills, and is a way of perceiving the surrounding world and of doing things. It is a way to face the world and express oneself. It can also make individuals more visible to others.

## 7. Conclusion

Although it is not possible to generalize the results of this qualitative study, the results provide important insight into developing curricula, and highlight the importance of high-quality arts education in early childhood education.

Critical reflection on the results may help us to develop better university curricula for future kindergarten teachers. In the current situation where higher education curricula are in a state of transition, we should concern ourselves with how the status of visual arts education will be guaranteed in the curricula as well as in the instructional practices of early childhood education. With today’s restricted resources it may seem that visual arts education is too expendable. However, we think that visual arts education has real and significant value, in that it is a long-term investment in well-being (see e.g. Ollieuz 2011).

Our study found that educational background was not as important as a kindergarten teacher’s own interest in arts education or his/her earlier experiences in art. We therefore emphasize the importance of a sufficient amount of visual arts education during teachers training. Such studies allow all to assume the identity of visual arts educators as well. As important as having an opportunity for one’s identity as a visual arts educator to be nurtured, is also having at least the minimum resources for actual artistic experience during studies. Theoretical instruction is not enough.

A recent Finnish report (Varhaiskasvatuksen historia, nykytila ja kehittämisen suuntalinjat 2014) has pointed out that the higher the formal qualifications are, the more sensitive are staff to the children and the better are the children's learning results. The report also states that properly educated staff can develop activities more oriented to child-centred pedagogy and positive interaction with children, and are able to construct continua for activities. Staff qualification has been recognized as an essential indicator of quality: only high-quality education provides adequate professional abilities. In light of the above reflections, we ask whether an essential task of kindergarten teacher training is to inspire trainees to become involved in visual arts education and to find their own way in it. It is important for them to understand why art is needed in education and the kinds of traditions one can draw from. There should also be opportunities to update one's skills according to the notion of "lifelong learning in the arts."

We also hope that critical reflection on current practices in visual arts education will build better understanding when it comes to developing the national curriculum in early childhood education. Our study described visual arts practices as cultural activities for the children, although they were not found to be of central concern. In any case, we see visual arts education as an essential part of the cultural rights of the children, and emphasize that these rights must seriously be taken in account when planning new curricula.

In addition to preschool and elementary education, early childhood education plays a key role in guaranteeing the cultural rights of children, their agency, equality as well as equal accessibility to culture (see also Ollieuz 2011; Onnismaa, Rintakorpi, & Rusanen 2014). It is alarming that recent research suggests that the cultural rights of children are not fully respected in Finland (see Ehdotus lastenkulttuuripoliittiseksi ohjelmaksi 2014). According to the Ministry of Education and Culture's children's culture policy, Finnish children do not have equal cultural possibilities, and both their regional and social equality have not been realized.

The next step in our research is to more closely examine the different perspectives on art reflected by the researched practices. It is also still necessary to deepen our knowledge with respect to our starting-point question: How does professional education matter when kindergarten teachers implement art education in practice. In addition, we hope to discover visual arts education implementations in early childhood education by turning to "the case owners" themselves, the children. How do they experience visual arts education in day-care centres? How does art appear in their day-care environments?



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