

Exploring Preschool Teachers' Attitudes and Beliefs towards Teaching Visual Arts

学前教育对视觉艺术教学的态度和信念之初探

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Abstract: Visual Arts is recognised as an important sub-strand in the National Preschool Standard Curriculum that provide children the opportunities to enhance their interest, and artistic growth and development. However, visual arts is always gets a little attention as children are commonly engaged on academic content of the curriculum like reading, writing and arithmetic. This study aims to explore preschool teachers' attitudes and beliefs towards teaching visual arts. This study is a qualitative research involving eight preschool teachers. They are from Malaysia three different states -Selangor, Kuala Lumpur, and Sabah. The research design uses structured interview method of collecting data and this structured interview was carefully planned and conducted formally, where the researcher interviews the respondents, from a list of specific questions that are drawn up, to address the main aspects of the research. The data collected provides possible areas of improvement for preschool curriculum offer to young children. These findings support previous research, which show positive effects on attitudes and beliefs towards teaching visual arts to young children when support and encouragement is provided to preschool teachers. Furthermore, the study result found that preschool teachers were not well trained and varied in their implementation of visual arts teaching in preschools. More structured visual arts training was recommended to prepare preschool teachers for effective teaching in the subject area.

Keywords: preschool teacher, attitudes and beliefs, visual arts

摘 要: 视觉艺术被视为国家学前教育标准课程中的重要领域, 它为增强孩子们的兴趣以及艺术成长和发展, 提供了学习机会。一般来说, 孩子们的学习偏重于学术课程, 例如阅读、写作和算术, 而忽视了视觉艺术的培养。这项研究旨在探索学前老师对视觉艺术教学的态度和信念。它是一项定性研究, 涉及八名学前班教师。他们来自马来西亚雪兰莪州、吉隆坡和沙巴。研究设计使用结构化访谈方式搜集数据, 并且这种结构化访谈是经过精心策划及以正规方式进行的, 其中研究员从提出的一系列具体问题中

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采访受访者，以达致研究的主要目标。所搜集的数据是为了提升学前教育课程领域之素质。这项研究延伸了之前所进行的视觉艺术教学研究，研究结果再次证明，若学龄前老师得到支持与正面鼓励，这对他们看待幼儿教育的态度和信念将会产生积极的影响。此外，研究结果还发现，学前教师在学前班视觉艺术教学中如果获得良好的培训，将会使这领域获得更佳效果。

关键词：学前教师，态度和信念，视觉艺术

1. Introduction

Visual Arts is recognised as an important sub-strand in the National Preschool Standard Curriculum which promotes and provides children the opportunities to enhance their interest in learning, and artistic growth and development (MOE, 2017). However, with the current emphasis on academic performance in early childhood education, children get very little time to engage themselves in art activities (Fox & Schirmacher, 2015). In Malaysia, in the private preschool classroom context, usually the teacher has more than 20 children to take care and teach, so it is not an easy task to allow children to explore. Therefore, in these classrooms, where curriculum is concerned, children's interests or abilities is often neglected and their inner potential is completely forgotten (Zhitnaya, Lysenko, Levshina & Kiseleva, 2019; Lai, 2000). Indeed, preschools should open doors for children to access and embrace learning through multiple intelligences, including visual arts appreciation (Lindsay, 2017). Thus, preschool teachers play an important role in cultivating, as young children require being guided and encouraged by teachers to turn their curiosity to appreciate and enjoy visual arts activities as it assists in providing children opportunities to learn and develop artistically (Eman & Aseel, 2016; Gibson, 2003).

Preschool teachers' attitudes and beliefs about teaching is very important as it will affect and guide their classroom behaviour as well as classroom practice as it will influence children's desire to learn (Maier, Greenfield & Bulotsky-Shearer, 2012). Attitude is a major determinant of one's behaviour to react to the possibilities of change in teaching (Min, Rosy & Sabarish, 2014) and their beliefs is about own judgement of the teaching ability to produce positive outcomes for children's learning (Maier et al, 2012). Preschool teachers who demonstrate positive attitude and belief in thinking to adapt their teaching methods in visual arts, will nurture children's creative growth and aesthetic development (Goodman-Schanz, 2012). For example, by providing drawing activities, teachers can provide opportunities for children to explore, to draw from simple scribbles to representing objects that are meaningful to people other than themselves (Vlach & Carver, 2008). Hence, preschool teachers should allow children to work with minimal disturbance, but respect, guide and praise children's creative artwork (Wong, 2007), and this will also enhance their own development of new and more efficient ways of

realizing their teaching process as well (Tomljenović, 2018). However, questions might arise on whether current preschool teachers believe in the benefits of visual arts in children's development. This should be explored in detail to help promote visual arts teaching in preschool settings.

The research objectives:

- 1) To identify the purpose of offering visual arts to preschool children.
- 2) To explore the methods or approaches preschool teachers use in their visual arts class.
- 3) To explore ways to improve current art education in preschool for young children.

The research questions:

- 1) What is the purpose for offering visual arts to preschool children?
- 2) What methods or approaches are used in visual arts class?
- 3) What can we do to improve current art education in preschool for young children?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Visual arts in Early Childhood Education

Visual arts in early childhood education aims to nurture the potential development of a child in a holistic and integrated manner as a child who is confident, creative, imaginative and capable to face future challenges (MOE, 2017). However, although the guide promotes using fun, meaningful and inquiry-based learning strategies to stimulate children's holistic development, most preschools still focus on academic performance that benefit cognitive and language development (Leung, 2018). This emphasis on children's academic attainment especially the 3R's, i.e., writing, reading and arithmetic has resulted in limited time for fun, and meaningful explorations for children (Tee & Mariani, 2018), especially through visual arts activities.

Making progress in visual arts, also allows children to understand themselves when they apply their problem-solving skills and motor skills to make their ideas come to life on paper (Lai, 2000), as well as helping young learners to develop their sensory, perception and thinking skills (Lummis & Morris, 2014). Through visual arts, is where children learn ways of experiencing, developing, representing and understanding ideas, emotions, values and cultural beliefs while working on their art project (Gibson, 2003). Besides that, through visual arts learning environment, too, children learn to address and embrace diversity, present emotions freely with no right or wrong answers, which allows them to see social realities and are able to differentiate values in the world (Punzalan, 2018; Theodotou, 2017).

2.2 Preschool teachers' attitudes and beliefs in their profession

Attitudes and beliefs are important concepts and can be defined as teachers' general positive or negative feeling towards the processes of thought, classroom teaching practices, and to change ways of conducting the activities, as well as their classroom behaviour of learning to teach (Koballa & Crawley, 1985; Richardson, 1996). Preschool teachers' attitudes and beliefs about teaching are considered important theoretically as it will affect preschool teachers' classroom practices on how they interpret and implement their lesson (Maier et al, 2012). Preschool classrooms using developmentally appropriate practice to teach visual arts are perfect space to nurture children's curiosity and encourage them to use their senses to observe, problem solve, think divergently, express thoughts, and question (Pendergast, Lieberman-Betz & Vail, 2015).

Previous studies have conceptualized attitudes and beliefs as complex and multiple dimension constructs that will lead human behaviour that are thought to drive a person's actions to teach (Richardson, 1996). Furthermore, the concepts of attitudes and beliefs have been frequently investigated as they are relatively closed and associated with teaching (Ozcan, 2019). Attitude and beliefs can be expressed as an individual's multiple dimensions to perceive and judge of their role as a teacher of visual arts, towards a situation such as their perception of visual arts knowledge, content and effective way of teaching will collectively affect their teaching performance outcomes (Ozcan, 2019; Maier, et al, 2012). Thus, today's preschool teachers are expected to improve competences, and to play roles in line with these characteristics (Osman, Cetin & Senol, 2020).

Hence, preschool teachers' attitudes and beliefs about teaching are considered important as it will affect and influence the quality of visual arts teaching in their classroom through what they know (Maier et al, 2012). Planning relevant activities for young children, by strategically expanding playtime and asking questions that challenge children's thinking, and creating meaningful learning opportunities to help children to draw an understanding between their observations, ideas, and judgments are essential (McDonald, 2018). However, their approach and results of their work depend mostly on their personal enthusiasm for teaching (Tomljenović, 2018), and their understanding that unique contribution of visual arts can make children's life experiences to be of quality and it also contributes for their wellbeing (Gibson, 2003).

Thus, it is important that the preschool teacher has positive attitudes and beliefs when interacting actively with children, while doing art, as it will help to promote children's social and language skills (Lai, 2000). Further, by doing so, the preschool teachers also learn to observe, document, and analyse children's behaviour to understand what they are "telling" (Green, 2012) as this opportunity provides preschool teachers good time to scaffold (as a facilitator) immediately on how to assist the children to think, to share, and understand their rights and responsibilities (Punzalan, 2018) through visual arts. Hence, exploring preschool teachers' attitudes and beliefs

towards visual arts teaching is especially important (Maier et al, 2012), as the aesthetics process involves children's active engagement rather than passive taking in (Fox & Schirmacher, 2015). Thus, preschool teachers' who possess positive attitudes and beliefs in supporting children in their decision-making, in solving problems, and in developing values, stimulate young children's thinking through appropriate art performance (Punzalan, 2018).

3. Research Methodology

This study was carried out through qualitative method to collect data. The main data involves analyses of the feedback from the respondents which were carefully compared and contrasted when the data collected was interpreted. The research design uses structured interview where three questions relating to their attitudes and beliefs towards visual arts and its appropriateness for implementing it in their classroom, are created. The questions planned for each respondent are the same, but it was translated into Chinese language for some of the respondents to have better understanding of the questions asked, which were in line with the research objective (Chua, 2016). The process of gathering information was complex which involved mostly personal opinions, attitudes and experiences.

The researchers employed subjective sampling to select the participants. The sample for this study consisted of eight preschool teachers. Out of 8, 4 of them were preschool principals. The respondents were aged between 23 and 58 years. Data collected from interview was via phone, email and WhatsApp. The respondents were aware that the information collected will be strictly used for this study purpose.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Preschool teachers' view on the purpose of offering visual arts to children

All the interviewees indicated that visual arts should be introduced in early childhood curriculum. They stressed that visual arts education provides preschool children artistic opportunities that encourage their learning while contributing to and advancing their holistic development. They further expressed that visual arts is an essential building block in the early years as it supports the development of a child in several ways, such as encouraging creativity, observational abilities, stimulates imagination and problem solving. Teacher S and Teacher J both also believe that visual arts education should be offered during the early years as it will enhance children's communication and promote socialization and art appreciation through fun and enjoyable ways. Teacher S further stated,

Visual arts provide an opportunity for children to freely express their ideas, and thoughts without any restrictions. It provides easier and more relaxed form of learning atmosphere to

young children, especially encouraging creativity and imagination, to develop their social skills and confidence level.

Teacher L also indicated that visual arts is essential in early childhood education as it helps to promote aesthetic awareness in the early years, as well as to enhance children's holistic development, promote confidence with everyday experiences such as oral language, having new capabilities for developing knowledge, symbolism and representation while doing art. Teacher L further shared that *"I am not a trained art teacher, but I believe that art provides pre-schoolers artistic opportunities, and it can be connected, and integrated to support other learning areas such as early science and mathematics activities."*

Teacher L further mentioned that singing a related song with the children on the topic discussed before the art activity is one of the various ways to attract and engage children. Thus, value the role of visual arts in early childhood education as crucial, and preschool teachers should be made aware of the significant benefits arts contribute to children's overall-balanced development.

4.2 Preschool teachers' attitude and beliefs towards appropriate methods used in visual arts teaching and classroom practices

With regard to the appropriate methods used in teaching visual arts in the classroom, most of the feedback from the interviewees were positive and encouraging. Before any visual arts activity begins, Teacher L stated that *she uses child-centeredness approach, where she will brainstorm, discuss the related topic and let children freely explore the materials, so that children will understand better and have more ideas about what they will do in the visual arts activity.* Whereas, Teacher W, thinks that an experienced teacher will guide children to interact, and share about people, event and things related to the planned artwork, for instance on what to draw and so on. Teacher T shared that she will encourage children to spy and observe objects related to the topic before children begin their artwork. By doing this, she believes that children's problem solving and decision making skill can be enhanced. However, Teacher S stressed that *at present her preschool usually does more structured craft sessions compared to exploring with different media to express creativity. As this, mainly is the easiest to manage, less mess to clear up, and the end result is somewhat controlled due to teachers finding it hard to venture into the element of an unknown outcome and would very often choose to go with the safe and planned outcome.*

Many studies carried out have also revealed that teachers possess a positive attitude in teaching, however they become reluctant when it comes to the actual implementation (Wanderi, 2015). In this situation, as explained by Teacher S, *"despite of knowing how children learn and develop, some of her teachers are still reluctant to make changes in their way of their teaching style, for active participation with freedom in the use of materials for exploration in visual arts activities."* Teacher S, who has more than 15 years of teaching experience as a principal,

realized that only teachers who possess positive attitude towards the teaching profession will make an effort to make their classroom learning more fun, and active for the children. Furthermore, Teacher X also has the same view point, that when preschool teachers lack soft skills when handling visual arts class, they may exhibit a more negative attitude, such as asking children to colour the pre-print patterns. Thus, she feels that children's learning will be indirectly affected, they will not learn to look at problems from different perspectives, in order to solve them.

Nevertheless, Teacher H and Teacher S, both further stressed that sometimes children are also given freedom to draw whatever is in their imagination based on a selected topic and the main media used would be pencil and colour pencils. They personally love to see children been given different types of media to work with, such as, crayons, paint or magic colour, to work on collages and drawings. In addition, Teacher S expressed how advantageous the activity would be, if it is entirely up to the teacher and also from their own experience and knowledge to vouch for freedom of creative expression.

This similar case happened to Teacher SY's preschool as well, she said that there are preschool teachers still using traditional teaching methods in visual arts class. For example, they will let children create their artwork on pre-printed pictures and children just use colour pencils to colour the uncoloured picture without bringing out their own ideas. Hence, she believes that preschool teachers' attitudes and beliefs must hold well, otherwise it will affect their teaching practices. This will encourage their children to explore, experience, and to engage in visual arts activities within and in their immediate learning environment. She further expressed that some preschool teachers are actually aware of the importance visual arts plays in early childhood education, however, due to the academic expectation, children are given limited time to use their imagination and creativity through art.

There were three teachers, who have identified themselves to be at low confidence level in teaching visual arts, one of them is Teacher T. She stated *that her low confidence level was sometimes due to lack of visual arts knowledge, and fear of not meeting the learning outcomes, especially reading and writing*. Based on their working experiences, 6 of the interviewees agreed that some of the teachers' preference are on subjects where they feel most comfortable and have most support from school such as literacy and numeracy instead of teaching visual arts.

4.3 Improvement of current visual arts education in preschools

All the interviewees expressed that, in current preschools art education can be improved by providing training to the teachers, and exposing them to knowledge on art. They agreed that with fully grasped knowledge and understanding of the function of visual arts, they maybe less concerned about the outcomes of the end product, but rather think and belief about how children learn by doing and developing the opportunities of seeing through the visual art process. They also think that the arrangement of the physical environment in the preschool, in terms of

aesthetics, the space and the types of materials provided and how the materials are arranged must be given importance. All these non-verbal communicate carries a very powerful message, on how visual arts is valued within an educational setting in a particular preschool. Teacher S stated that

“I have been in some Chinese schools where art work of children are all standardised. Chinese schools are very fixed in a sense that they focus more on perfecting the end product. Thus, the outcome of this is that every child’s work looks the same. I think preschool should be given more exposure and opportunities for art appreciation or there should be further training and study. Preschool directors also must be exposed to the importance of creative development as they are the ones who will chart the direction the schools will take.”

Whereas, Teacher W pointed out that *“I personally think that preschools have to bring to the attention of parents and community, the importance of aesthetic experiences like creativity for young children as the source of encouragement and support to individual development, manifestation of abilities, and social advancement shall not only foster throughout the curriculum but to increase the collaboration with parents and community to work in visual arts area.”* Further, Teacher X also stressed that for successful implementation of visual arts education in preschools, preschool teachers must first be familiar with the age characteristics of children’s physical and mental development, respect the characteristics of children’s personality, and understand how life has an enlightening effect on children through art activities. However, they have limited understanding and experience of how to implement this successfully.

Majority of interviewees agreed that current visual arts in preschools tend to be taught, by using traditional approaches, and probably their major learning does not focus on art, as they think that improvement of the skills in their art teaching is unnecessary. So, Teacher J suggested preschools send their teachers for visual arts teacher training and that preschools should provide sufficient support for preschool visual arts teachers to look for ideas and teaching materials so that visual arts activities can be connected to other topic of the studies. Teacher J further added that some of the teachers who have more work experience sometimes find that there is no need for additional professional training, as their experiences are considered good enough to handle the activities. Moreover, they also find it hard to venture into the element of unknown outcomes and would often choose to go with the safe and planned outcome. Thus, she suggested to increase preschool teachers’ art knowledge and competence in order to reduce the anxiety and enhance their confidence towards teaching visual arts. While Teacher T also emphasized that preschool teachers should attend more visual arts related classes to empower their skills on how to reuse natural things to create artwork instead of having to buy materials, so that children also can get to be educated on how to care for their environment. Teacher W also shared that added to this is also, parents’ expectation on the academic performance of their children and the low

rating of visual arts in preschools is not as important compared to other subjects. So, Teacher H suggested to encourage parents to focus and spend more time with their children on creating art together, to have better family bonding time to improve their art sense, so that they can realize and understand better their children's development benefited through visual arts activities.

5. Limitations and conclusions

The findings of this study show that the interviewees have demonstrate positive attitudes and beliefs toward teaching visual arts. However, this study cannot be generalized to practices of other leaning areas without further examination as the sample size is too small with only eight preschool teachers who were selected. Thus, it cannot be used to represent, and reflect other preschools teachers' level of attitudes and beliefs in teaching visual arts in the Malaysian context. Further, due to current Covid-19 pandemic it has been difficult for the researcher to carry out observations in the respective preschools.

The finding indicated that preschool teachers display a high degree of control in the classroom, but due to limited time allocation, children are restricted to explore, observe, and express ideas before beginning any art activities. Moreover, preschool teachers' insufficient knowledge and skills in visual arts are the obstacles when implementing the art activities in their classroom. So, it is recommended that preschools provide and offer comprehensive professional training and development courses on visual arts to their teachers from time to time for effective teaching in the subject area. Preschool centres may collaborate with professional trainers to organize workshops for parents and the community on how visual arts support the children's learning and development. In addition, the preschools may provide their teachers support for additional study and training on visual arts in order to provide high standard of quality early childhood program for the future leaders. As for future research, experiments and investigations on the impact of visual arts to children's performance, and the exploration of influences on children's learning perception in visual arts can be conducted.

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