



Art in Early Childhood

Eighteen Months Later: Empowering Early Childhood Educators Through Professional Learning in Visual Arts Pedagogies

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Abstract

Visual Arts (VA) pedagogies provide children with essential opportunities to explore, communicate, and make sense of the world. However, despite the critical role of educators in shaping children's VA experiences, there is limited research into the VA self-efficacy beliefs and pedagogical practices of Degree-Qualified Teachers (DQTs) and Vocationally Trained Educators (VTEs), and even less research identifying Professional Learning (PL) strategies that effectively build educators' self-efficacy and Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) for the delivery of VA education with young children. The strong influence of personal and professional self-efficacy on pedagogical choices and curriculum design demands further research at the intersection of VA self-efficacy, PCK and PL. The study described in this paper explores the challenges Early Childhood (EC) educators face in implementing VA pedagogies and investigates whether PL can strengthen their ability to teach VA effectively and confidently. Lewin's Force-Field of Change was applied to explore the drivers and inhibitors of VA practice following a 2022 PL intervention. The study involved using qualitative methods to examine the experiences of ten (10) educators from four (4) EC settings with data gathered through two rounds of semi-structured interviews 18 months apart. The research found that the PL intervention, which included in-person modelling of exemplary VA pedagogies with children, improved educators' VA practices and fostered deeper appreciation for the role of VA in children's individual and collaborative learning. Participants reported increased confidence in balancing intentional teaching with child-led exploration and highlighted VA as a valuable tool for emotional regulation. However, contextual staff shortages and inadequate pre-service training were found to limit participant's VA self-efficacy beliefs and practices. The research highlights the need for sustained, targeted in-service PL to strengthen educators' VA self-efficacy and PCK. The study suggests that targeted PL can deliver long-term improvements in

VA teaching and build educator's self-efficacy and professional capacity to foster children's creativity, collaboration, and self-expression through VA pedagogies.

Introduction

Early Childhood (EC) is a critical period for children's development, when they actively seek to make connections and explore their world. Visual arts (VA) education plays a significant role in this process (Brooks, 2017; Lindsay et al., 2025; Vecchi, 2010). VA experiences offer a range of benefits, including, but not limited to, nurturing imagination, cognitive skills, fine motor skills, and visual-spatial awareness (Eckhoff, 2011; Lindsay et al., 2025). VA learning experiences foster creativity, self-expression, and problem-solving skills and shape children's identities as art makers, thereby influencing their lifelong arts identities (Lindsay et al., 2025). Collaborative and intergenerational artmaking, guided by skilled educators, offers opportunities to develop artistic awareness, creative skills, and critical thinking (Wright, 2014).

However, while VA pedagogies are central to EC education, educators report low self-efficacy for designing and implementing VA learning experiences (Denee et al., 2024). In Australia, EC educators are classified as either Degree-Qualified Early Childhood Teachers (DQTs) or Vocationally Trained Early Childhood Educators (VTEs). While these qualification pathways are legislated to ensure pedagogical quality, there has been limited research into EC educators' VA self-efficacy beliefs and pedagogical practices. Although DQTs are expected to uphold curriculum quality, including in the arts, the reality is that many generalist educators lack confidence and adequate training in VA pedagogy (Denee et al., 2024; Lindsay, 2021).

Research suggests this can lead to a cycle of unexamined practice, where educators replicate the types of limited VA processes they experienced throughout their own education, thereby restricting children's access to meaningful VA learning (Lindsay, 2016; 2021). It is therefore necessary to explore the capacity of both DQTs and VTEs to implement VA curricula and to identify the supports required to enhance VA pedagogy across the Early Childhood education (ECE) sector, and it is vitally necessary to ensure children experience the benefits of quality VA curriculum experiences. Analysis, utilising Lewin's Force Field Theory, further revealed the dynamic interplay of drivers and inhibitors, where expert modelling and collaborative learning acted as strong drivers that somewhat counterbalanced systemic and emotional inhibitors. Finally, evidence of sustained VA intentionality emerged, with educators maintaining enthusiasm and integrating VA more purposefully into practice, though sustainability remains dependent on ongoing support and structural improvements. These key findings are now discussed with reference to scholarly literature and integrated with the voices of the participants.

The Transformative Role of Visual Arts

Visual arts in EC education are widely acknowledged as a transformative domain that fosters creativity, problem-solving, and holistic development (Richards & Terreni, 2022). Indeed, VA experiences enable children to explore ideas, express emotions, and engage in inquiry-based learning, supporting cognitive, social, and emotional development (Lindsay et al., 2025; Vecchi, 2010). The Australian curriculum positions the arts as central to fostering critical and creative thinking, risk-taking, and communication (Ewing, 2020). Visual arts encompass diverse media such as painting, drawing, collage, clay work, and digital arts, and offer opportunities for cultural understanding and inclusivity (Lindsay, 2023; Bodrova & Leong, 2007). Aligned with Reggio Emilia's "hundred languages" philosophy, VA promotes multimodal expression and collaborative learning (Hargraves, 2020).

Despite its potential, VA remains under-recognised and inconsistently implemented in EC settings, often due to gaps in educator confidence, Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK), and systemic support (McArdle, 2012; Lindsay, 2021). While intentional teaching is widely promoted in literacy and numeracy, VA remains marginalised in professional discourse (Grieshaber et al., 2021; Denee & Cherrington, 2023). However, regardless of its numerous learning benefits, VA lacks clear definitions and best-practice guidelines in EC education (Lindsay et al., 2025; Probine, 2017). Compounding this issue, the Early Years Learning Framework [EYLF] for Australia (AGDE, 2022) provides little guidance for delivering VA pedagogies, nor specific methods for curriculum inclusions.

Educator Practices and Beliefs

Educators play a pivotal role in facilitating meaningful VA experiences, yet research reveals persistent uncertainty and low confidence in VA teaching (Lindsay, 2021; McArdle, 2012; Richards & Terreni, 2022). This VA uncertainty often stems from personal beliefs and external pressures (Fielding et al., 2023; Lindsay, 2021), affecting confidence and consistency in VA teaching (Lindsay, 2015; 2017; 2021; Smyth & Davis, 2016). Many educators also lack PCK, limiting their ability to differentiate open-and-close-ended VA experiences (Hedges & Cullen, 2005; Ryan & Goffin, 2008; Leung et al., 2024). Educators report limited skills and knowledge, often shaped by negative personal experiences with art education, which create emotional “baggage” and inhibit practice (Lindsay, 2021).

Although educators play a crucial role in shaping VA experiences, their self-efficacy, PCK, and practices remain underexplored (Denee et al., 2024). This is problematic, as self-efficacy not only influences pedagogy but is shaped by personal experiences, including childhood, pre-service, and in-service training (Bilton, 2020; Lemon & Garvis, 2013; Lindsay, 2021; McArdle, 2013, 2016; Mertala, 2019). Denee et al., (2024) highlight that supportive structures, collaborative learning, resources, and mentorship empower educators' confidence, yet many educators face barriers to accessing practical and effective VA training (Schachter et al., 2019).

Professional Learning Interventions

Targeted PL is critical for enhancing educators' VA self-efficacy and PCK (Klopper & Power, 2010; Cutcher & Boyd, 2018). Effective PL equips educators to integrate VA into curricula, foster creativity, and design open-ended experiences (Schachter et al., 2019). However, research on VA-specific PL remains limited, with little evidence of its long-term impact on practice or child outcomes (Denee et al., 2024). Pre-service training often fails to prepare educators adequately, reinforcing gaps in confidence and knowledge (Garvis & Pendergast, 2011; Leung, 2018). Successful PL programs are those that are contextually relevant, sustained, and embedded in daily practice (Jackson et al., 2006; Zaslow et al., 2011).

Drivers and Inhibitors of Visual Arts Pedagogy

Educators' ability to implement VA is shaped by a complex interplay of drivers and inhibitors. Drivers include access to resources, supportive leadership, and targeted PL opportunities, while

inhibitors encompass low self-efficacy, limited PCK, and systemic challenges such as poor pay and working conditions (Thorpe et al., 2020; Lindsay, 2021). Drawing on Lewin's Force-Field Theory as the theoretical framework for this research, these conditions can be understood as opposing forces that either push towards or pull against change. In Lewin's model, successful change occurs when driving forces outweigh restraining forces, making it essential to identify, strengthen, and rebalance these dynamics within educational contexts (Rickards, 1999). Reducing barriers such as anxiety and lack of training, while simultaneously reinforcing drivers through sustained PL, is therefore critical for embedding VA as a core pedagogical practice (Connelly, 2023).

While the transformative potential of VA is well documented, it is necessary to better understand how PL interventions influence educators' beliefs and practices over time. Few studies have identified the sustained impacts of Visual Arts PL, nor explored the contextual drivers and inhibitors that shape VA pedagogy. This study offers new insights by investigating the ongoing effects of a VA-focused PL intervention, educators' current practices and beliefs, and the forces that enable or constrain VA implementation in EC settings.

Research Design and Methodology

The principal aim of this research is to highlight challenges that EC educators may face in implementing VA pedagogies and to examine whether PL supports educators to feel better equipped and more confident in their VA practice. Specifically, this study investigates the VA self-efficacy beliefs and PCK of ten (10) Australian EC educators, explored through interview reflections about the ongoing practice and knowledge impacts of a prior 2022 PL intervention study. Using qualitative methods, the study identifies factors that may impact educator self-efficacy and confidence for planning and delivering VA curricula. (see Figure 1).

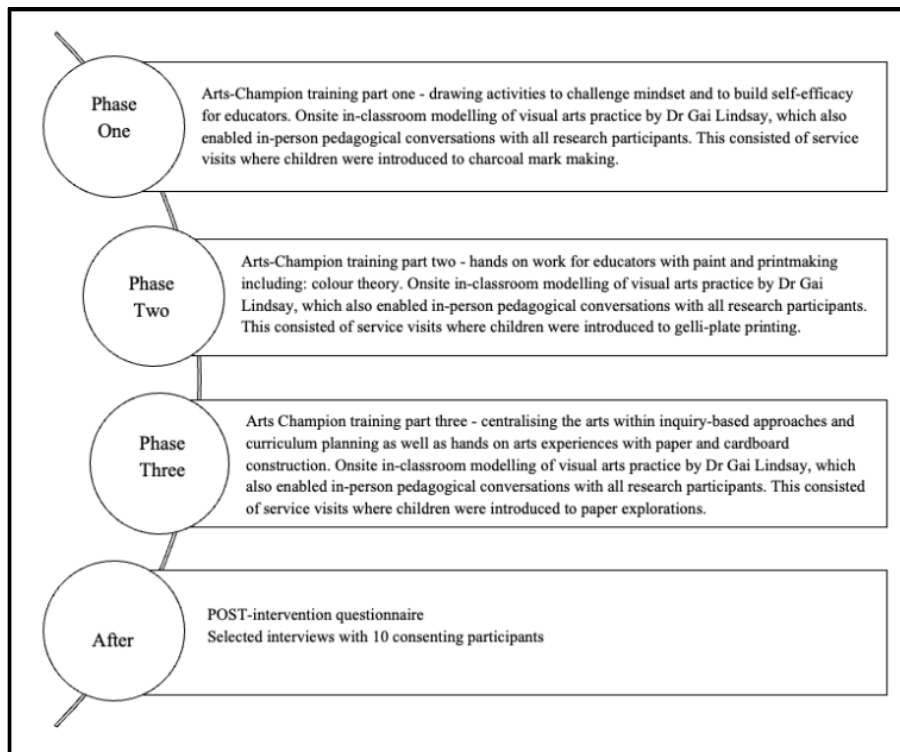


Figure 1. *Three Phases of Professional Learning Delivery*

Building on the earlier research conducted in 2022 in four (4) EC settings, this research included the final participant interviews at the close of the PL intervention. The original study examined whether a leadership-for-learning approach (Siraj et al., 2018) to VA training could enhance self-efficacy and PCK. However, in the first study, post-COVID workforce challenges negatively impacted both participation in online training modules and survey responses, limiting the planned quantitative analysis component. Despite these disruptions, the original study produced rich qualitative interview data, justifying the follow-up research described in this paper. The current study therefore conducted follow-up interviews to revisit and evaluate the sustained impacts, if any, of the original PL study.

This research extended the original research study to answer the following research questions:

What are the ongoing impacts, if any, of an Early Childhood Visual Arts Professional Learning intervention?

What current practices and beliefs do Early Childhood educators report about their Visual Arts pedagogy?

What drivers and inhibitors do Early Childhood educators identify that impact their Visual Arts pedagogy?

The present study employed qualitative methods to explore the impacts of a 2022 VA PL intervention and to identify drivers and inhibitors affecting educator self-efficacy and confidence in planning and implementing VA curricula in EC settings. Qualitative design enabled collection of data to appreciate the subjective experiences, beliefs and practices of educators. As Kervin et al., (2016) note, qualitative research is particularly valuable in education for generating rich, narrative-based insights.

The original study had involved 54 participants from four (4) EC services operated by a regionally located EC education organisation and incorporated both original and post-intervention surveys and interviews. The original PL intervention consisted of three phases of PL content delivery designed and delivered by the original study researcher and Professional Learning Facilitator (PLF). The PL intervention, informed by a leadership-for-learning approach to PL (Siraj et al., 2018), sought to implement and evaluate an approach to PL that would build the VA knowledge and self-efficacy of the EC participants. Across the three phases, the training consisted of in-person hands on VA workshops with volunteer classroom arts-campions, the provision of pre-recorded online training videos and readings for all participants and in-person classroom visits where the researcher and PLF implemented and exemplified play and application of specific VA materials and processes with children and their educators. The final round of interviews, conducted with ten (10) participants following the 2022 PL intervention led by the original study researcher and PLF aimed to assess the effects of a leadership-for-learning approach on educators' VA self-efficacy and PCK. However, because the capacity of participants to effectively engage with online PL components and contribute to the research were compromised by post-COVID workforce issues, a follow-up study was designed. The follow-up interviews within the current study therefore extended upon the original research to determine whether the positive PL impacts suggested by the original study data had been sustained in practice. Follow-up interviews were conducted 18 months after the conclusion of the original study with 10 participants.

Participants

In the follow-up study, participants from the original study were re-interviewed to gather new qualitative data through semi-structured interviews. The follow-up study involved six (6) original participant educators from the original study and four (4) directors from each of the four (4) EC services; each was purposively selected to provide contextually rich insights (Kervin et al., 2016). Of the four (4) service directors, two had been classroom educators in the original study. These participants provided a reflective assessment of current VA practices in each of the EC settings; and shared whether the PL intervention impacted the quality of VA learning for the children in each of the EC settings.

Research participants who volunteered to engage in the study were Early Childhood Teachers (ECTs) and EC Educators with vocational Diplomas or Certificate III qualifications. Participants included: a Pedagogical Leader, Arts Champions (educators who take on leadership roles within the arts, helping to promote creativity, support school arts initiatives, and inspire their peers to participate and express themselves), and finally EC Educators with vocational qualifications. The study aimed to give participants a voice in expressing their professional and personal beliefs regarding VA self-efficacy beliefs, skills and PCK and to report on any sustained impacts from the original PL intervention research. For confidentiality, pseudonyms were used, with the participant roles and qualifications outlined below.

Ella (DQT) - Pedagogical Leader: This individual operated as the gatekeeper of the PL intervention during the original study and participated in both the original and the follow-up interviews.

Jo (VTE), Nel (VTE), Shani (VTE) and Sally (VTE) - Arts Champions: Four Arts Champion participants from the original study each participated in both the original and follow-up interviews.

Gilly (DQT) - This participant was an educator during the original study and ECT during the follow-up and participated in both the original and follow-up interviews.

Bel (Working Towards DQT)- Arts Champion (now a Service Director): Initially an Arts Champion during the original study, this participant is now a director at one of the services and participated in both the original and follow-up interviews.

Camille (VTE) - Arts Champion (now a Service Director): Initially an Arts Champion during the original study, this participant is now a director at one of the services. They did not participate in the original interview; however, they did participate in follow-up interviews.

Nina (DQT) and Kim (DQT) - Service Directors: These participants were not interviewed in the original study, however, both participated in the general PL intervention. They participated in the follow-up interviews to reflect on the impact of the PL intervention on their services.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were individually conducted, 18 months post-intervention, to explore participants' VA self-efficacy, skills, PCK, current practices and reflections on the previous PL intervention. The interviews aimed to provide a comprehensive overview of VA practices, pedagogical beliefs, and educator VA self-efficacy since the original interviews. The insights gathered from these interviews are instrumental in understanding the evolution of practices at the service level. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to freely express their views, with questions tailored to each participant's role and responsibilities (Creswell, 2013). Interviews ranged from 10 to 36 minutes and were conducted to encourage natural conversation and

observe contextual cues (Kervin et al., 2016). Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Member checking allowed participants to clarify or amend their statements, ensuring accuracy (Kervin et al., 2016). Examples of questions asked included:

Can you tell me what you remember from the training?

Can you summarise what has been happening in your practice since the intervention project in relation to Visual Arts experiences?

How confident do you feel to plan and implement Visual Arts experiences with children?

What drivers and inhibitors do you as an Early Childhood educator identify impact your Visual Arts pedagogy?

Data Analysis

The study employed a constant comparison method to systematically code and categorise data, using Excel to organise themes and subthemes. Initial coding and transcription were conducted by one student researcher, followed by collaborative review by the research team to ensure rigour and depth (Kervin et al., 2016). A logico-inductive approach formalised theme identification, grouping findings into drivers and inhibitors, with subthemes mapped for each participant. Summaries of responses were paired with illustrative quotes to strengthen alignment with research questions and enhance qualitative validity (Creswell, 2013).

Analysis was iterative, involving repeated engagement with the data to uncover educators' VA practices, beliefs, and the impacts of the PL intervention. Field analysis guided interpretation of contextual factors enabling or constraining change, supporting categorisation of drivers and inhibitors (Wallbridge, 2024). Following Kervin et al. (2016, p.122), a spiral of analysis continued until a comprehensive understanding was generated (see Figure 2). This process provided rich insights into EC settings, revealing sustained influences of PL on educators' attitudes and practices

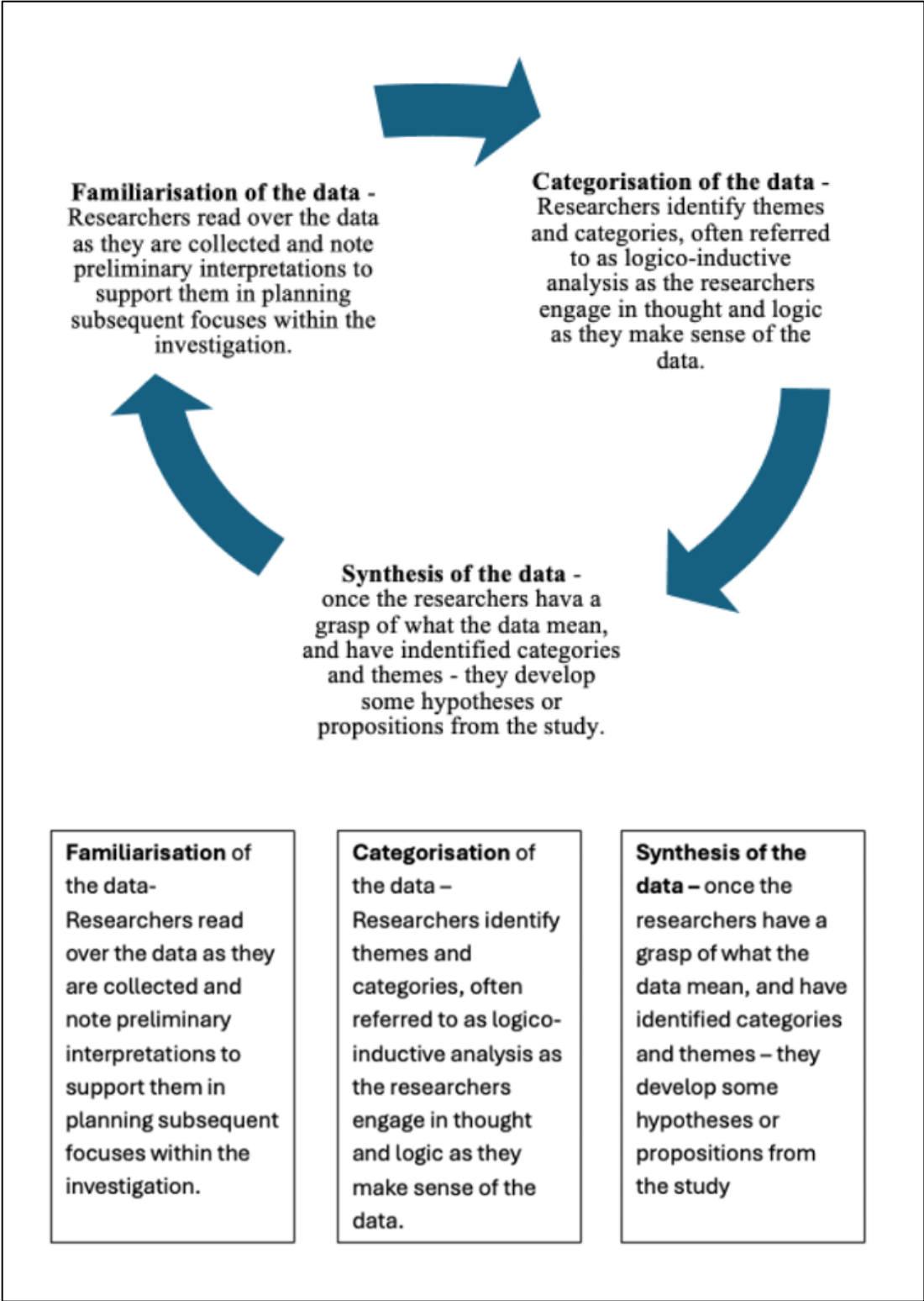


Figure 2: A data analysis spiral inspired by Kervin et al (2016 p.122)

Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Wollongong Human Research Ethics Committee (UOW HREC 2021/349) and research adhered to national ethical standards. Interviews were scheduled at mutually convenient times, with classroom coverage provided to maintain ratios. Participant confidentiality was protected through use of pseudonyms and secure data storage protocols. Ethical engagement fostered trust, positioning the researcher as a collaborative peer rather than evaluator (Yin, 2009). In presenting data findings, confidentiality was maintained by allocating codes for participant quotes in alignment with pseudonyms. For example, codes such as 'Interview 2S' denote the participant (by initial) and the data source (by word and number).

Findings and Discussion

This study explored the ongoing impacts of a VA PL intervention on EC educators, examining their current practices and beliefs, and identifying drivers and inhibitors influencing and impacting upon their VA pedagogy. The findings from this study reveal several interconnected themes that illuminate the long-term impact of the VA PL Intervention. First, the research highlights the transformative potential of VA, demonstrating how the PL reshaped educators' understanding of VA as a powerful tool for creativity, collaboration, and emotional regulation. This shift was supported by a move toward intentional teaching and process-oriented practice. Alongside the change in pedagogical intentionality, the study identified enhanced VA self-efficacy and PCK resulting from aspects of the PL intervention, with educators reporting increased confidence and competence in delivering VA experiences. However, persistent barriers, both structural and personal, continued to constrain implementation.

Transformative Potential of Visual Arts

Educators consistently acknowledged VA role in fostering creativity, collaboration, and emotional regulation in children, echoing Cutcher and Cook (2016) and Vecchi's (2010) work. Ella recalled an impactful collaborative moment:

"When we did those big charcoal pieces...it was amazing. Ten children working together, creating something as a team" (Interview 1E).

These experiences reinforced VA's role in supporting holistic development and social-emotional growth (Leung et al., 2024). Participants observed that VA offered children a positive outlet for emotional expression, aligning with research on its therapeutic and regulatory benefits (Hanna, 2014; Leung et al., 2024).

Intentional Teaching and Process-Oriented Practice

The PL intervention shifted educators' focus from product-driven to process-oriented approaches, aligning with McLaughlin et al., (2016) and Lindsay (2021). Gilly noted: "The PL definitely highlighted the importance of Visual Arts in the curriculum and emphasised the need to offer it daily" (Interview 2G).

Ella emphasised the educator's role as facilitator:

"They don't need an artist...they just need an adult who can guide them, support them, and ask questions" (Interview 2E).

These reflections illustrate a growing appreciation for inquiry-based, child-led exploration supported by structured guidance (Cutcher & Boyd, 2018). Educators reported adopting strategies that balanced explicit instruction with child autonomy, resonating with Vygotskian socio-cultural perspectives on learning (Wright, 2014).

Enhanced Self-Efficacy and Pedagogical Content Knowledge

Participants reported increased confidence and improved PCK following the PL intervention, supporting Pillen et al. (2013) and Smyth & Davis (2016). Sally described her transformation stating, “I’ve completely shifted from feeling unsure about my abilities to embracing practice, exploration, and repetition” (Interview 1S). Bel echoed this sentiment, noting “After tackling the art content...I realised that I am actually more capable than I thought” (Interview 2B). These findings affirm Lindsay’s (2023) emphasis on the importance of educator beliefs and attitudes in fostering children’s creativity and meaning-making. Gains in confidence enabled educators to prioritise VA as a core learning domain, integrating it into daily routines and linking it to other curriculum areas.

Persistent Barriers: Structural and Personal

However, despite such positive shifts in attitude, a range of systemic challenges to VA integration were recalled by participants including, but not limited to, staff shortages, time constraints, and resource limitations, echoing research by Lindsay (2017; 2021) and Craw (2015). For example, Gilly explained, “It became quite challenging to implement experiences when we were the primary caregivers...staff shortages, especially due to COVID-19, really impacted how we could implement the project” (Interview 2G). Personal histories also shaped educator’s VA confidence, with many educators recalling negative school art experiences (Garvis & Pendergast, 2011; Lindsay, 2021). Ella shared, “We had that mandatory art class, and the teacher wasn’t very friendly” (Interview 1E). Bel also noted, “I think people’s attitudes and feelings about it vary...It takes participating regularly for my feelings to change” (Interview 1B). Such findings underscore the emotional dimension of VA pedagogy and the need for PL to address entrenched personal beliefs.

Drivers and Inhibitors

Hands-on PL emerged as a critical driver, enabling educators to experience VA benefits firsthand and to observe effective modelling of practice (Schachter et al., 2019; Lindsay, 2021). Jo reflected:

“Sitting down with them and doing it alongside them...showing them what you would do, and then they can explore from there” (Interview 1J). Conversely, misunderstandings about the PLFs role and difficulty engaging with theoretical content acted as inhibitors, echoing Denee & Cherrington’s (2023) findings. These findings illustrate Lewin’s Force Field Theory, that while PL introduced strong driving forces such as confidence, PCK and collaborative practice, restraining forces such as systemic barriers and negative dispositions limited full engagement with the PL project and translation of PL intervention learning into practice.

Despite the systematic barriers experienced during the original PL intervention, educators recalled their observational experience about VA's positive impact on children's emotional regulation and social skills, reinforcing Leung et al., (2024) and Wright's (2014) positioning of VA as a medium for emotional expression and collaborative learning. For example, Ella recalled a powerful PL intervention moment, stating, "Look who has been here for half an hour participating...and look how regulated they are leaving that experience" (Interview 1E).

Sustained Visual Arts Intentionality

The PL intervention strengthened key drivers such as increased confidence, enhanced PCK, and recognition of VA's role in fostering creativity, problem-solving, and emotional regulation (Vecchi, 2010; Leung et al., 2024). Eighteen months post-intervention, educators reported sustained enthusiasm for VA, adopting more collaborative, hands-on approaches. Expert modelling by the PLF emerged as a critical driver, inspiring educators to integrate VA meaningfully into practice and embrace intentional, process-driven pedagogy. However, systemic barriers—including staff shortages, time constraints, and resource limitations—alongside entrenched negative dispositions and limited pre-service training, continued to inhibit full implementation. These findings illustrate Lewin's Force Field Theory, where strong driving forces introduced by PL were counterbalanced by restraining forces, echoing Ewing's (2020) concerns about systemic pressures deprioritising creativity and Lindsay's (2021) call for improved VA training in pre-service programs.

Recommendations

Building on these findings and acknowledging the inevitability of systemic challenges, several recommendations emerge to strengthen VA pedagogy and overcome barriers identified in this study. These recommendations aim to embed VA more deeply in EC education and ensure educators have the confidence, knowledge, and resources to implement high-quality arts experiences:

Expand creative arts coursework beyond tokenistic modules, ensuring hands-on experiences that build confidence and PCK (Denee et al., 2024; Lindsay, 2021).

Prioritise immersive, whole-team PL with guided practice and role modelling to foster collaborative learning and confidence (Schachter et al., 2019).

Provide clearer guidance on VA within the curriculum framework documents to make quality VA practice more explicit.

Allocate time, resources, and staffing to support VA integration, recognising its role in holistic development (Ewing, 2020).

Limitations and Implications for Future Research and Practice

While this study provides valuable insights into the long-term impacts of a VA PL intervention, we acknowledge that its small sample size and geographic scope limit generalisability. Additionally, we note that post-pandemic workforce impacts further constrained data collection and continuity of the PL interventions under examination. However, as Kervin et al. (2016) argue, small-scale qualitative studies offer nuanced insights into practice complexities often

overlooked in large-scale research. For these reasons we suggest that future research should adopt longitudinal designs to examine sustained impacts of VA PL interventions and explore systemic factors shaping educators' confidence and practice. Research should also further study optimal PL features such as expert modelling, collaborative learning, and experiential engagement to inform scalable strategies for embedding VA in EC education.

Conclusion

This research described in this paper affirms that VA pedagogy is not an “extra” but a vital component of high-quality early learning. Well-designed, sustained PL can empower educators to integrate VA meaningfully, enriching children's creativity, expression, and holistic development. By prioritising VA within training (both pre-service and in-service), the EC education sector can better ensure all children experience the joy and benefits of arts-based learning. Additionally, despite inevitable and ongoing systemic challenges, this study highlights that in-person and in-service pedagogical modelling and mentoring offers sustainable, powerful, and positive impacts on EC educator's VA PCK, self-efficacy and determination to centralise VA pedagogies in the EC education curriculum.

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