

# Are the Arts important in schooling? Clear messages from the voices of pre-service generalist teachers in Australia

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## Abstract

The Arts are an important part of curriculum in Australia. While it is an important area of the curriculum, teachers may not share the same views of importance. Views and perceptions about the Arts are formed during the beginning phase of teaching which includes pre-service teacher education. This important period of belief development can provide insight into what future Arts practice will look like in schools.

In 2013, a survey was administered at two universities in Australia to explore the beliefs and perceptions of pre-service teacher generalist teachers about the importance of Arts and the role of Arts in schools. Pre-service teachers were also asked to share information on their current levels of Arts engagement. A total of 206 participants returned the survey. Findings highlight the lack of understanding about the Arts and poor engagement with Arts activities outside of university as an adult. These findings highlight a concern about the place of Arts education and are troubling for the future of Arts education in the Australian context.

**Key words:** Arts education, pre-service teacher, beliefs

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## Introduction

Beliefs about the teaching of Arts education inform a teacher's capability to teach the Arts. If beliefs are positive, the teacher is more likely to engage with Arts experiences in their classroom (Garvis & Pendergast, 2010). If beliefs are negative, they will either limit the exposure of Arts education in their classroom or ignore it all together (Garvis & Pendergast, 2010). Many beliefs about Arts education are formed during teacher education and from personal and professional prior experience (Lemon & Garvis, 2013). It is for this reason the

exploration of teacher beliefs about Arts education is important.

This paper explores the perceptions of pre-service teachers currently studying to become primary school teachers in two Australian universities in two different states (Victoria and Queensland). A survey was completed by 206 participants and analysed using statistical analysis. Findings provide important insights into the current views and perceptions about the role of Arts in schools and current levels of personal engagement with the Arts. These

beliefs will inform a teacher's ability to implement Arts education in schools. By taking a snapshot of these beliefs, we are able to predict Arts engagement in a primary school classroom.

## Literature

Over the past 35 years in Australia, several Inquires have been made into the quality of Arts education occurring in schools (*New South Wales Ministry of Education*, 1974; *Australian Senate Inquiry into Arts Education*, 1995; *National Review of School Music Education*, 2005; *National Review of Visual Education*, 2008; *National Audit of Music Discipline and Music Education Mandatory Content within Pre-service Generalist Primary Teacher Education Courses: A Report*, 2009). These reports have expressed concern at the quality and quantity of Arts education occurring in schools. As yet, limited assistance has been implemented to try and improve current problems within teacher education and the provision for Arts education within schools (Ewing, 2010). One of the established problems over the last 35 years has been the lack of confidence of generalist primary teachers.

The confidence of generalist primary teachers is informed by beliefs about their own confidence. These beliefs are formed during pre-service teacher education and once made, are resistant to change. If we want to explore ways to improve the provision of Arts education in Australian classrooms, it is important to explore theoretical understanding of beliefs, known as self-efficacy beliefs.

Self-efficacy beliefs operate as a key factor in a generative system of human competence (Bandura, 1997). Teacher self-efficacy relates to the beliefs teachers hold about their own perceived capability in undertaking certain teaching tasks. Bandura (1997) defines self-efficacy as "beliefs in one's capabilities to organise and execute the course of action required to produce given attainments" (p. 3). Self-efficacy therefore influences thought patterns and emotions that enable classroom actions. In the

context of education, teacher self-efficacy is considered a powerful influence on teachers' overall effectiveness with students. Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy (2001) suggest that supporting the development of teachers' self-efficacy is essential for producing effective, committed and enthusiastic teachers.

Teacher self-efficacy is a motivational construct that directly influences outcomes in the classroom. It has been related to student achievement (Moore & Esselman, 1992; Ross, 1992); increased job satisfaction (Caprara, Barbarnelli, Borgogni & Steca, 2003); commitment to teaching (Coladarci, 1992); greater levels of planning and organisation (Allinder, 1994); and working longer with students who are struggling (Gibson & Dembo, 1984).

Teacher self-efficacy is influenced by four sources: mastery experiences (serving as an indicator of capability); verbal persuasion (verbal influences on perceived capability); vicarious experiences (modelling and observation of techniques); and emotional arousal (associated with the perceived capability that influence the process and outcomes of the task attempted). Mastery experiences are considered the most powerful influence as they provide authentic evidence of one's performance in a teaching situation (Bandura, 1997; Mulholland & Wallace, 2001). Successful performance by a teacher leads to increased self-efficacy, while a failure creates a decrease in self-efficacy. As teachers develop mastery experience that lead to accumulating increases in teacher self-efficacy, they rely on these as memories and interpretations of similar past teaching experiences (Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy & Hoy, 1998).

The context and areas of content are important influences on the formation and judgments of teacher self-efficacy. Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy and Hoy (1998) emphasise the importance of cognitive processing in the formation of efficacy expectations. For this to occur, teachers analyse the task to be accomplished and assess their competence in relation it. Analysis of the

task is dependent on the context of the teaching situation and the specific content.

As yet, limited research has explored the development of teacher self-efficacy formed during enrolment in teacher education programs and during the beginning phase of teaching. Research suggests that teacher self-efficacy tends to increase during teacher education enrolment (Hoy & Woolfolk, 1990; Wenner, 2001) but decrease after graduation to the end of the first year of teaching (Woolfolk Hoy, 2000).

Few studies in Australia have investigated the impact of teacher self-efficacy for the Arts during pre-service teachers' education (Lemon & Garvis, 2013). Investigations that have been conducted examine teacher self-efficacy for beginning teachers (Garvis & Pendergast, 2010, 2011). These studies highlighted the low levels of perceived capability for teaching the Arts compared to English and maths with generalist primary teachers and early childhood teachers. To date there was only one study found that provided information on current levels of pre-service teacher self-efficacy (Lemon & Garvis, 2013) that highlighted the lack of understanding about the importance of visiting museums and engaging with artists in residence during pre-service teacher education. This paper helps to fill this void by providing information on the importance of understanding pre-service teacher beliefs about the Arts. These beliefs will inform future implementation of Arts education in generalist primary classrooms in Australia.

## Focus of study

In Australia, any student studying teacher education is considered a pre-service teacher. A beginning teacher is a teacher with fewer than three years' experience since graduation from their teacher education programs. While evidence suggests that teacher effectiveness spikes after the first years in the profession, it is a concern that many teachers exit prior to attaining this desired level of expertise (Worthy, 2005).

This study is interested in the pre-service teachers' perceptions towards Arts education in Australian primary schools. Beliefs about the Arts are formed during the beginning phase of teaching that includes pre-service teacher education. It is therefore important to understand what the current level of beliefs are as this will directly influence the level of engagement with Arts education in a classroom.

The survey questions provide insight into engagement with artists, cultural diversity, museums, and levels of confidence. The intention was to provide a view of opinion from two university cohorts in two different states within Australia. This provided a better glimpse of overall perspectives as views were not limited to a state.

## Method

In semester 1, 2013, pre-service generalist primary teachers at a university campus in Victoria and a university campus in Queensland were provided with information on a voluntary anonymous survey exploring their views on Arts education. Ethical approval had been granted for this project from the Human Ethics Committee at each of the institutions involved. An information letter and the survey were administered to all students. Students provided consent to the survey by completing and returning the survey to an anonymous drop box on each campus.

The survey was created using demographic questions and Likert scales to engage opinions. A five point Likert scale was used with 17 questions to engage level of agreement with a statement about the Arts. An example of a statement was:

Q1) The Arts were a very important part of my education

1= Strong disagree, 2 = disagree, 3= neutral, 4= agree and 5= strongly agree

The 17 questions were created from research and literature about Arts education in generalist primary schools.

Surveys were returned by 121 participants at site one and 85 surveys were returned by participants at site two. Only surveys that answered every question were used. This gave a total sample of 206 participants. Students were completing either a Bachelor of Education (73%) or a Graduate Diploma of Education (27%). The majority of students (85%) were aged between 20-24 years.

Data was analysed using descriptive statistics for measures of central tendency (e.g. means) and demographics of the sample. The mean was found for each of the 17 questions once data from the two cohorts were combined. The mean was then aligned with a statement of agreement.

## Findings and Discussion

The survey was designed and implemented with pre-service teachers as the authors were interested in collecting data about prior experiences with the Arts at university and outside of university. This provided insight into past and current levels of engagements with Arts subjects. Key findings from the questions were:

- 57% of students had never studied an Arts course at university prior to the Arts course they were currently enrolled in.
- 45% had visual arts experiences outside of university.
- 22% had media experiences outside of university.
- 35% had drama experiences outside of university.
- 24% had dance experiences outside of university.
- 48% had music experiences outside of university.

These findings suggest that around half of the students did not experience an Arts form outside of the university. As beliefs about the Arts are influenced by past experiences in the Arts, these insights suggest that some pre-service teachers have little prior experience to draw upon. With limited experience in the Arts forms, pre-service generalist teachers may be less confident to teach the Arts. Such low levels of participation in the

Arts could also be connected to a presumed lack of seeing value in education for young people and thus not integrating Arts education opportunities into the primary classroom learning environment that they facilitate.

In the Likert scale questions, pre-service teachers also shared views about Arts education, confidence levels and the importance of Arts in children's lives. These are presented below in Table 1.

The first and second questions provide information about prior and current engagement with the Arts. Interestingly, the mean of the participants suggested a disagreement with the statements about the Arts in prior education and current life. These findings align with earlier disclosures of Arts engagement in adulthood, however they also show limited Arts exposure while at school during childhood. This could suggest a life trajectory of limited experiences with the Arts, and a low willingness to engage with Arts education in their roles as teachers. It would be interesting to see if the same type of life trajectories occur for other key learning areas in the curriculum such as health and physical education. The limited exposure to the Arts may be part of the overall Australian nation having a greater affiliation and identity with sport rather than the Arts.

Self-image is also important for developing confidence to teach Arts education. Again the mean suggests the pre-service teachers disagreed with the statement that they would consider themselves artistic. Again this could be because of limited experiences within the Arts. With limited understanding of 'the artist' and the 'artistic process', pre-service teachers may not consider themselves teachers of the Arts. While this survey did not collect information about their beliefs of Arts specialist teachers, it would be interesting to know if they consider the role of Arts education in schools the responsibility of the Arts specialist teacher.

The pre-service teachers, however, were positive about the importance of Arts learning in schools. There was strong agreement with the statements that Arts are fundamental to children's learning and all children have an entitlement to Arts education. Even though the pre-service teachers did not experience the Arts themselves, they still felt an important need for it to be part of a child's learning.

Many of the other statements answered by the pre-service teachers produced a mean in the 'neutral' category. This may be because of limited understanding of the Arts in schools, including teaching and curriculum development. The pre-service teachers involved in the survey have also had limited practicum experience

within a schooling context. This may have been reflected in why they disagreed that they have had experience working with artists and teaching in schools.

It is important from these findings that pre-service teachers have access to positive experiences with the Arts during teacher education courses, professional experience and during the beginning phase of teaching. Pre-service teachers need to be provided with models from university teachers, supervising teachers and schools of favourable Arts teaching and engagement to help build knowledge and skills leading to an increase in confidence. By providing pre-service teachers with positive experiences, it also provides them with a range of experiences

**Table 1: Responses to Arts Questions.**

Questions	Mean	Agreement
Q1 The Arts were a very important part of my education	2.8	Disagree
Q2 I regularly participate in the Arts as an adult	2.7	Disagree
Q3 I consider myself to be artistic	2.5	Disagree
Q4 Creativity is mainly associated with the Arts	3.2	Neutral
Q5 Every child should have an entitlement to an Arts education	4.5	Agree
Q6 The Arts are fundamental to children's learning	4.4	Agree
Q7 The Arts are fundamental to children's cultural development	3.9	Neutral
Q8 When Arts are taught together they are more powerful than when taught separately	3.7	Neutral
Q9 The Arts should be at the centre of the primary curriculum	3.2	Neutral
Q10 In my experience, most primary schools don't devote enough time to the Arts	3.5	Neutral
Q11 In my experience, school timetables tend to be too rigid to develop children's creativity	3.4	Neutral
Q12 Children need to visit museums and galleries as part of their Arts education	3.1	Neutral
Q13 I have experience in teaching the Arts in primary school	2.3	Disagree
Q14 I have experience of working with artists (dancers, musicians, artists, etc.) in primary schools	2.2	Disagree
Q15 Children need to work with artists in primary schools	3	Neutral
Q16 I feel confident to include the Arts in my own teaching	3.7	Neutral
Q17 I know to bring together different art forms in my teaching	3.8	Neutral

they can later draw upon in their own generalist primary classrooms.

This study is limited by the fact that it cannot be generalised across all of Australian teacher education programs. Findings represent the views and beliefs of two cohorts at only two Australian institutions. However it does provide insight into the current levels of beliefs that directly inform confidence about the cohorts. Further study is needed to build a bigger picture of pre-service teacher education across Australia and longitudinal work is needed to track beliefs across pre-service teacher education and the beginning phase of teaching.

## Conclusion

This study has provided important insights into the beliefs of generalist pre-service teachers at two Australian universities in Australia. The lack of prior experience in the Arts is reflected in their beliefs about school Arts teaching, curriculum development and engaging with museums and artists. While the pre-service teachers believe the Arts are important for young children's learning, it appears they have little experience to draw upon to develop positive beliefs of teaching the Arts in generalist classrooms. It is hoped that as the pre-service teachers engage in practicum experiences their views will be challenged and changed by competent and capable supervising teachers who implemented engaging Arts experiences. If the pre-service teachers are not able to access such role models during their professional experience they appear from this study to have little experience and understanding to draw upon. It appears that while numerous government reports have investigated the problem of Arts teaching in schools, until recommendations and change occurs, the cycle of low Arts engagement in primary school classrooms will continue.

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