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New understanding of the nature and development of children's artistic expression²

Extended summary

One of the fundamental principles of working with children in the field of visual arts in preschool and primary education is understanding the children, their nature, and their developmental characteristics. The alignment of teaching methods and expectations with these traits enables the success of art activities and the overall development of the child. Therefore, it is crucial for (both preschool and primary school) teachers to understand the nature and development of children's artistic expression (CAE) for effective teaching and fostering development. Researchers must also possess this knowledge to conduct adequate research in this field, and further develop the theoretical concepts of CAE.

In the study of CAE, there are traditional theories from the 1930s and 1940s, and contemporary theories from the 1990s. Although contemporary theories align better with the current society and the nature of art, traditional theories still dominate today, negatively impacting both the work of teachers and contemporary research in the field of art education.

This paper presents a theoretical comparative analysis, examining both groups of theories while considering the context of the time in which we live. The goal is to demonstrate how the reliance on the traditional theories of CAE development in contemporary society leads to

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a series of inadequate teaching methods in visual arts in preschool and primary education, discriminating against the natural ways of CAE and alienating children from art. The paper highlights the importance of accepting all aspects of CAE emphasized by contemporary theories, shedding light on the shortcomings of traditional theories and their negative pedagogical implications. It underscores the significance of the contemporary theories as they positively influence the implementation of the visual art activities in kindergartens and schools, as well as children's attitudes towards art.

The analysis points out the deficiencies of the traditional theories in the context of diversity and cultural specificity of CAE, as they do not encompass all forms of expression that children naturally engage in and which contemporary theories do recognize. The traditional theories of CAE development relied on the concept of visual realism as an ideal to be achieved, linearity, and progressiveness in development, neglecting cultural context and various media. According to these theories, the development of CAE follows the fixed stages that are universal for all children, regardless of the cultural and social context in which they live. The contemporary theories, on the other hand, have pointed out that CAE development is nonlinear, and does not progress towards a singular ideal point—visual realism. Instead, it occurs under the influence of the sociocultural factors and is multimodal, meaning that it involves the simultaneous use and intertwining of multiple modes of expression, such as drawing, speech, gestures, and text. They particularly emphasize the significance of spontaneous children's drawing – created in their daily lives without adult supervision – through which children create meaning, communicate messages, and make sense of the world. Also, instead of the fixed stages that follow one after another, as traditional theories discussed, contemporary theories highlight the parallel existence of various pictorial genres, each with different visual characteristics and functions, which children adeptly know when and how to use, depending on their intent. Contrary to the belief of the traditional theories, that children create according to their interest in artistic, creative, and aesthetic values, the contemporary theories of CAE development suggest that in their visual expression children are more focused on the effectiveness of visual representations as carriers of meaning, rather than on these values.

As understanding the nature of CAE and its development influences how visual art activities are conducted in kindergartens and schools, it is essential for teachers to grasp both traditional and contemporary theories and their implications. It is crucial for art education to reflect the current context and embrace the contemporary understanding of CAE. Instead of the traditional emphasis on CAE centered on visual realism and artistic intention, there is a need to shift toward exploring diverse pictorial genres, particularly those with immediate practical value in children's lives, including spontaneous drawing. However, the diversity of the pictorial genres cannot be developed and nurtured by using a single methodological approach. For children to explore various pictorial genres, teachers must be aware of the existence and significance of each, their unique characteristics, as well as understand their purpose and specific applications. To enable the development of each genre, teachers must be trained to employ a range of different approaches and methods tailored to each specific pictorial genre, which sometimes means applying mutually contradictory methodological approaches.

Finally, as the traditional theories of CAE development, are still predominating, they negatively impact contemporary research focused on CAE, producing questionable results, interpretations, and pedagogical implications. Therefore, it is crucial for future research in art education to rely on the current theories of CAE development, to ensure that the results are relevant and positively influence teaching in this area.

Keywords: children's artistic expression (CAE), traditional and contemporary theories of the development of CAE, fine arts genre, fine arts activities in kindergarten and school, the role of preschool and primary school teachers

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