



It's all about attitude

How eight educators view and value preschool visual art education

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Preface

In completion of this 30-credit qualitative research, I qualify for my M.Ed. degree in teaching and learning studies, specializing in art and technical studies at the University of Iceland. I would like to give special thanks to my teachers Svanborg R. Jónsdóttir, Lecturer in Arts and Creative work at the University of Iceland and Hafdís Guðjónsdóttir, Professor in Pedagogy and Special Education at the University of Iceland, for their guidance and support throughout this long journey. I would also like to acknowledge the work the Sva-Ka-Haf group offers their students and say how much it is appreciated.

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Ágrip

Þetta snýst fyrst og fremst um viðhorf Viðhorf og gildi átta kennara til sjónlista í námi leikskólabarna

Þessi rannsókn varpar ljósi á og gefur innsýn í viðhorf starfsfólks til sjónlistir í leikskólum. Einn þriðji starfsfólks leikskóla á Íslandi eru menntaðir leikskólakennarar og þar af leiðandi eru tveir þriðju starfsfólks með aðra menntur og eða starfsreynslu. Þrátt fyrir að starfsfólk leikskóla hafi margskonar bakgrunn og reynslu þarf allt starfsfólk að vinna samkvæmt Aðalnámskrá leikskóla.

Átta þátttakendur frá fjórum leikskólum á Stór-Reykjavíkursvæðinu, fimm almennir starfsmenn og þrír í stjórnunarstörfum, voru valdir út frá menntun, stöðu og starfsreynslu í leikskóla. Þetta var gert til að endurspegla margbreytileika í bakgrunni starfsmanna og til að kanna hvort sá margbreytileiki hafi áhrif á gildi og viðhorf til starfs þeirra tengt sjónlistum í leikskólum. Gerð var eigindleg rannsókn og fór hún fram frá febrúar til apríl 2014. Opnar spurningar voru notaðar í viðtölunum og þann tíma sem unnið var úr gögnunum fór fram stöðugur samanburður á þeim upplýsingum sem birtust í gögnunum við efni rannsóknarspurninganna. Slík greining á gögnum byggir á aðferðum grundaðrar kenningar.

Niðurstöður rannsóknarinnar benda til þess að viðhorf og reynsla starfsfólks til sjónlista í leikskólum hafa veigamikil áhrif á það hvernig unnið er með þær í leikskólum. Þeir þátttakendur sem höfðu reynslu af að vinna með leiðtoga í skapandi starfi voru allir sammála um að það hefði ekki einungis jákvæð áhrif á þekkingu þeirra og nálgun listnáms, heldur einnig jákvæð áhrif á börnin; gæði listnámsins ykist innan skólans. Þátttakendur voru sammála um að símenntun viðhaldi fagmennsku þeirra, en nefndu að lítið væri um námskeið tengd efninu innan sveitarfélagsins. Svör þátttakenda við spurningunni um hvað börn lærði í gegnum sjónlistir voru flest óljós en allir voru meðvitaðir um mikilvægi sjónlista fyrir menntun barna, gleði og hamingju.

Abstract

It's all about attitude:

How eight educators view and value preschool visual art education

This research examines educators' views about visual art education in preschool settings. In Iceland today one third of staff in most preschools are qualified preschool teachers while the other two thirds have some other kind of education and/or working experience. Even though the group has diverse backgrounds, all staff ought to work in accordance with the National Curriculum Guide for Preschools.

Eight participants from four preschools in the greater Reykjavík area, five general staff and three holding managerial positions, were purposefully selected based on their education, age, position and experience with working with children in preschool settings. The intent was to represent the diversity of educators' backgrounds to see if that influenced how they view and value their work in teaching preschool children visual art. This is a qualitative research project which took place between February and April 2014. Open questions were used in the interviews and constant comparative methods chosen for the organization and analysis of data.

The results of this research suggest that educators' attitudes and experience with visual arts play a vital role in how it is being offered in preschools. Participants who have experience working with a creative mentor all agree that their knowledge and approach to teaching art benefit and influence both children and staff in positive ways and thereby increase the quality of art education that is offered in their schools. Participants agreed that continuous learning is beneficial for working in a professional manner, but also mentioned that there had been very few art-related courses available for staff to take part in. Participants were unclear on what children learned from art but were aware that it was important to their education and that in the process it evoked joy and happiness.

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1 Introduction

Visual arts practices stimulate creative thinking which is essential for learning not only in art but all areas of life. Preschool educators are not accustomed to using the term visual art, but rather use the terms art or craft. Most art activities that are practiced in preschools today deal with projects that use some kind of visual art practice. Educators are responsible for offering stimulating environments which encourage children to learn by using their imagination, building their creative thinking skills and arousing their senses through various modes of exploration. Visual arts practices encourage emotional, physical and social skills, which are the foundation of all areas of learning. For this to be achieved it is vital that educators are motivated, enthusiastic and show interest in what they are doing, and above all they need to have the knowledge of practice and theory to be able to work effectively.

I am a preschool teacher who held the position of creative mentor within my workplace for some years until cutbacks were made and the position made redundant in the financial recession. It was during this time that I doubted my education, knowledge and understanding of why art matters in children's education. I had the need to ask questions and find answers about how preschool art education is viewed and experienced, especially as all educators are required to teach it regardless of their background or education. I was familiar with the research done by Bamford (2009), which concluded that arts education in Iceland is of high international standard and that it holds a core position within Icelandic society and education, but I still questioned how preschool visual arts were being practiced when not all educators have skills or knowledge related to the subject.

I have become aware of different attitudes towards visual art education with young children of preschool age. Through the years I have experienced positive attitudes towards teaching visual arts, where the educator has knowledge of what art has to offer education, and they have found ways to incorporate it into their daily working routine. When there is a lack of knowledge and interest regarding visual art, its practice is "just done", or put "on hold", to do other activities that the educator feels more comfortable doing. In this case, the creative opportunity can easily become a mundane

“cut-copy-paste” craft lesson, where children learn to follow instructions rather than develop creative thinking.

For art to be educational, stimulating and encourage development, children need to be active in solving problems that they encounter in their art work. Educators who offer children art projects with predetermined outcomes as well as solve their problems for them are not enabling children to develop creatively, and may even lead to them losing interest. Instead, teachers need to organise and observe art activities without threatening the “ownership” of the child’s work (Lowenfeld and Brittain, 1982).

The presence of a sensitive teacher is vital to children’s creative involvement, whereas the lack of teacher involvement resulted in children showing less interest in art activities. Therefore it is important that teachers develop understanding and skills necessary to create conditions for children’s art to flourish (Edens & Potter, 2004). Creativity is defined as a skill that needs to be cultivated and practiced for it to develop, and needs creative teachers who are able to model creativity in ways that encourage children’s creativity and their problem solving skills (Schirmmacher, 1998). For children’s creative needs to be met, teachers need to be sensitive to children’s abilities and knowledge, and know how and when to assist and support, and when to stand back and encourage by inquiring about their work. For educators to teach art successfully they need to be knowledgeable in art, materials, and a wide variety of developmentally appropriate art activities, as well as being able to encourage children to use, discover and explore all their senses. Just as children learn from good educators, educators can learn by listening and observing each other’s practices (Schirmmacher, 1998).

By working both with educating children and supporting educators with creative ideas and knowledge, I have noticed that even though creativity comes naturally to most children, it can be a difficult concept for adults. I question why that is. Do preschool educators have a good basic understanding of visual arts? Do they offer opportunities where learning can take place? Who is teaching children art and what education or interest do they have? Is there an understanding of how and what young children learn through art experiences? I am interested in learning about how educators feel about teaching children visual art and if their beliefs shape their practice in doing so.

The results of a small study of early childhood educators’ self-efficacy for arts education in Queensland, Australia show that educators’ self-efficacy beliefs in their ability to teach arts education affects their ability to do so (Garvis & Pendergast, 2011). Educators who have a strong self-efficacy for

teaching arts education are more likely to incorporate it into their classroom and those who have a weak self-efficacy are less likely to do so. The results also show that for teachers to have strong self-efficacy in teaching art, they need the knowledge and skills as well as the possibility for professional development in the arts (Garvis & Pendergast, 2011).

School environments are influenced by and reflect the interests and beliefs of the school management, and therefore influence the quality of art education within their pre-schools. It was of interest therefore to investigate how preschool principals view art education and how it influences their attitudes and practice. School leaders who have positive attitudes towards children's visual art education are able to support, inspire and encourage their educators in working professionally in that field. I do not question that support, inspiration and encouragement are important factors, but what I want to know is how this translates to and how it reflects in the work done with children.

Educators' values and views on how children learn and develop influence their expectations of children's education, as well as what and how they encourage learning. As educators need to meet the goals set by school curricula, they need to find a curriculum that shares their beliefs and ideas to be able to support it sufficiently. By conducting this research I hope to shed light on how preschool educators view and experience teaching visual art, and indicate how it is being taught, and suggest how it can be further improved upon (Schirrmacher, 1998).

1.1 Choice of research question

During my studies, both in the University of Akureyri and the University of Iceland, I have learned about the importance of creativity and art education, and how it contributes to children's learning and development. Creativity, along with literacy, sustainability, health and welfare, democracy and human rights and equality are the six categories that make up the fundamental pillars of education, set by the Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Preschools (2011). Even though creativity can be discussed independently, the other categories are reflected in it and related to it, as well as to each other. Therefore, when working specifically with creativity, the other categories are also promoted.

The National Curriculum Guide for Preschools (2011) discusses teachers' competence as more than having knowledge and skills, but also the need to be positive, have good social skills, a sense of morality, be creative and show initiative. One way teachers can encourage creativity in preschools is through

the practice of visual arts. I have pondered what requirements are needed to offer high quality visual arts education in preschool as well as how views and values play a role in how it is practiced.

My research question is: How is preschool art education valued, experienced and viewed by preschool educators?

1.2 The purpose and goal of this thesis

The purpose of this research is threefold. The first is of a personal nature, and is the belief that with a better understanding of how educators experience and value visual arts education, I will benefit professionally by having better insight into how best to approach, encourage and assist educators in working creatively. Secondly I hope that this research influences discussions among educators regarding how they value visual art and how it can be used to benefit preschool education. Thirdly I hope that those who read this think about how they teach and what is learned, as it is in reflection that teachers can grow professionally and children benefit.

The goal of this research is to achieve a better understanding of how preschool educators teach visual art, what opportunities they create for effective learning to take place in visual art and if their past experiences affect the way they do so.

Creativity is one of the cornerstones of the National Curriculum Guide for Preschools in Iceland (2011) and an important part of education. This research hopes to shed light on the teacher and their role in children's education.

There seems to be a lot of research focused on external factors and outcomes, for example, curriculum, instructional strategies, how best to work and support programs of various kinds. Less discussion seems to be focused on the individual and their experiences, inner dialogue and personal qualities that they take with them when they teach and learn (Green, Kim & Korthagen, 2013). I believe that self-awareness and self-efficacy is the basis from which educators should start, as skills in visual art can be learned, but knowing how to influence, encourage and inspire others into learning those skills, comes about only if we ourselves believe and have interest.

Experiences affect not only the present but future experiences. This research deals with how educators' "inner dialogue" of past experiences affect and influence children and co-workers, by their "external dialogue" of what they say and their attitudes towards what and how they teach. Whatever the outcome of this research, I hope that it will encourage

discussions about the importance of art in education and how it is being taught and why.

1.2.1 Definitions of key concepts

To help the reader better understand this paper there are a few key concepts that need to be explained. The term *educator* will be used when referring to preschool staff, regardless of their education or experience. When a distinction needs to be made, preschool teachers will be used not to confuse them with primary, college or other educated teachers who could be working in preschools. When translating some words between languages, the meanings are not always clear. I will be using the word *assistant* to describe educators who are not preschool teachers. The reason I do this is that I feel the Icelandic words *ófaglært* (unskilled) and *leiðbeinandi* (guide, instructor or mentor) can be misleading when translated and do not correctly reflect the position in question.

Visual art can be explained as two- and three-dimensional images which are stationary while being observed, unlike acting, dance and music that rely on movement. Examples of visual arts are: paintings, drawings, visual design, photography, sculpture and computer art (Jewel, 2012).

When children have created an object which a teacher has decided upon, and followed instructions on how to do so, they have done just that, created an object of no creative value. On the other hand, when children use their imagination, come up with ideas and choose their materials to produce an object, then they are being creative. Creativity cannot be taught, but rather nurtured, and that is why it is essential for educators to be aware of how they are teaching to be able to offer opportunities for children to develop in this area.

I have often contemplated the use of the word creativity due to how it is used. One can follow instructions and create something without being creative. The words 'create' and 'creativity' may derive from the same word, but they do not have the same meaning. Merriam-Webster's online dictionary defines creativity as the ability for individuals to produce new and original ideas through their imaginative skills, whereas create is defined as making or producing something. Creativity can flourish when children are offered various opportunities for sensory experiences, and where children are motivated to think and work in ways that transcend traditional methods and lead to encouraging meaningful new thought processes (Sigurðardóttir, 1989).

Eleni & Kampylis (2014) use the term creative thinking rather than creativity, as creative thinking is necessary for any creative process to take place. They define creative thinking as thinking that enables individuals to use their imagination to come up with ideas, ask questions, hypotheses and experiment with novel ideas, resulting in a process and product. Children have especially more skill in creative thought as they have not been influenced by logic and conformity. The factors that contribute to their being creative are skills, a fertile environment and motivation.

Creativity is the ability to produce work that is original and useful (Sternberg, 2002). It is a threefold process of using one's imagination, creativity and innovation. Individuals *imagine* possibilities that they have never heard of or have previously experienced; *creativity* is the process of having original ideas that have value; and *innovation* is where new ideas are put into practice or produced (Robinson, 2011). *Possibility thinking* is said to be at the core of all creativity, where children or adults work alone or with others during the process of exploration and problem solving (Craft, 2012). Alexander (2010) graphically describes imagination as an engine that ignites one's creative thought processes, and creativity as the locomotive that pulls the imaginative wagons, turning them into products. Creative individuals are natural problem solvers who look for and operate in new and unusual ways (Fowler, 1996).

For the purpose of this thesis and the need for a better word, reference will be made to 'creative mentors' when discussing an individual who has oversight of art and creative processes in preschools. The role of the mentor is to support, inspire and advise both children and educators in working processes that benefit and offer good quality education. The creative mentor also sees to it that educators have materials and opportunities for executing their lessons.

When referring to children, I am referring to preschool children from two to six years of age.

1.3 Thesis structure

In the first chapter, the *introduction*, I discussed why I chose this topic and presented the research question: How is preschool art education valued, experienced and viewed by educators? In this chapter key concepts were defined to help the reader understand them in the context of this paper.

In the second chapter, the *theoretical chapter*, I introduce research and theories on educators, their education, influence and the role they play in

children's art education. Another main element is the importance and quality of art and creativity that is offered in preschools.

The third chapter deals with the *research methods* that were used, how and why the participants were chosen, and which measures were taken to ensure their human rights. This chapter also deals with how data was organised and analysed.

In the fourth chapter the findings will be discussed. *Creativity* and *educators* are the two main issues that stood out after processing and categorizing the material.

In chapter five the findings and theory meet and the main issues, educators and teachers, are brought to the foreground and discussed.

The conclusions are presented in the sixth chapter which deals with the results of this research, as well as my personal views and experiences, and propositions for further attention or research.

2 Theoretical background

Many ideas, theories and philosophies of and in art education influence and determine how preschool educators work, the way they view children's art education, and the way art is offered and practiced. McArdle & Piscitelli (2002) claim that with time, these influences intertwine and make way for new paths of thought in art education for teachers to explore, reflect and find ways to improve their teaching practices.

This chapter introduces two main themes. The first discusses creativity and art education and how it benefits children's learning and education, and the second considers educators' knowledge and awareness of teaching preschool children visual art.

2.1 Creativity and arts education

For educators to fully understand and work in accordance with national and school curricula there is a need for a unified understanding and defining of concepts and terms therein. Creativity is a broad term that can mean different things to different people.

According to the online Oxford dictionaries (2014), creativity is the use of the imagination or original ideas to create something. In the same dictionary art is defined as the use of imagination or original ideas to create something through the application of human creative skill and imagination, typically in visual form, appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power. Craft is described as the skill of making things by hand; this could be a practical object or the process of preparing food or drinks in traditional ways.

In the National Curriculum Guide for Preschools (2011) it states that creativity is a requirement in all areas of school activities and is one of the six major elements on which preschool curricula should be based and built on. The concept of creativity is complex and is defined in different ways in different times in society, and these views of creativity and art education are reflected in how it is practiced. "Learning takes place when an individual responds to stimulus, connects it to previous knowledge and creates new" (National Curriculum Guide for Preschools, 2011, p. 21), and when children become aware that what they are learning contributes to their lives they give value to what they learn (National Curriculum Guide for Preschools, 2011).

School curricula should be planned with values and qualities that promote and encourage children in critical thinking, problem solving skills and creativity, instead of planning to encourage children to conform to teachers' predetermined ideas (Eagan, 1992). When learning areas are taught through art, children's cognitive and social development become visible as they construct understanding of their senses and themselves, through their own experiences, rather than being partakers of their teachers' knowledge and predetermined projects (Write, 2010).

2.1.1 Cultural education

Research on arts and cultural education in Iceland shows that there is a good balance between traditional and contemporary practices in arts education, but distinctions between arts, creative and cultural education seem generally unclear, and an understanding of arts within education is limited (Bamford, 2009). Different societies and cultures view creativity and the arts in different ways and Iceland is no exception. With their strong association to history, the emphasis is on music, visual arts, textile and woodwork (Bamford, 2009).

Heritage has a strong impact on how creativity is viewed and the way it's encouraged within various cultures. As seen in You (2010), who examined South Korea's national curriculum for physical education, approaches were found that emphasise five values that physical activities offer education for the building of children's creative skills. The five values were health, challenge, competition, expression and leisure, which are believed to encourage and build creative thinking through children's learning experiences, rather than using traditional teaching methods. It is believed that children who find new ways of moving and interacting with gym equipment like jump ropes, gym balls and juggling, depend more on creative thinking than physical skills (You, 2010).

Arts in American society are not given priority or time for art subjects, as they do not believe it to be of importance to their culture or for what it can offer education, but rather as something that is done for enjoyment or to develop a skill (Fowler, 1996). A survey on the trends of art in education showed that teachers are concerned about how art is viewed and how they would rather like the arts to be acknowledged for its importance, both to society and education. The way art is viewed in society is the same as in schools; therefore society's views directly affect how art is viewed in schools and vice versa. When schools cut or eliminate art from their curricula they do not value or prioritise art (Fowler, 1996).

2.1.2 Materials and learning areas

Teaching materials are those materials used in the classroom to assist teachers and children in various learning processes. The materials should be carefully chosen to support children's learning areas that are to be encouraged and stimulated. Various materials stimulate the senses in different ways, which develop brain functions that are not only connected to the sense of touch but also to a combination of complex functions that influence and control movement, language, critical thinking and attention (Lewin-Benham, 2010), and the quality of these experiences are reflected in the quality of the opportunity that is offered (Caffaro, 1995). Humans develop and learn through the stimulation of their senses, through interactions with their environment, materials and partaking in social and cultural activities, where they become individuals who in turn give back to society and their culture (Fowler, 2002).

The materials that educators choose and make available show the value that they place on them. Materials are the "text of early childhood classrooms" (Caffaro, 1995, p. 37) and for that reason she mentions that they should be purposefully chosen and not offered just because it has traditionally been offered in the past or children merely enjoy using them. Materials that educators choose with the belief that they have educational value are materials that are more likely to be used more often and given a space in the school environment that is aesthetically pleasing (Caffaro, 1995).

Individuals may be creative in some areas but not others. Some may be creative in areas like drawing or singing but not in writing or mathematics, but when learning areas are developed and are encouraged in creative ways they are strengthened (Gardner, 1993). Creativity development stems from the relationships between an individual and their work, the response it evokes in others (Csikzentimihalyi, 2002) and the freedom to work unrestricted with open-ended materials (Write, 2010). Individuals who are able to use their imagination reflect on how to solve problems, set goals for themselves and use skills to find solutions are being creative (Fowler, 1996). There is always a great demand for creative, adaptable and resourceful individuals in the workforce and therefore development in these areas should be encouraged.

Education is more than acquiring knowledge and skills, but should also aim at making children aware of their competences and how they can use them to influence and interact with their environment in new and positive ways (The Icelandic Curriculum Guide for Preschools, 2011). Education is based on learning communities which incorporate and emphasise children's

self-awareness, social skills and understandings of their actions as well as creativity, which is characterised as one of the fundamental pillars of education (The Icelandic Curriculum Guide for Preschools, 2011). The reasons for teaching visual arts in preschools should go further than emphasising specific skills, practices and knowledge, but rather be acknowledged for the benefits it offers when integrated into other areas of learning (Eisner, 2002).

Visual art plays a very important role in children's education where they get to be creative, interact with materials and express themselves in personal ways that increase their self-awareness, build self-confidence and spark interest in what is being done through the first-hand experience that art offers (Bamford, 2009). Children's self-expression in visual art is often misunderstood as uncontrolled, unstructured or even imitated work. In fact it is the process of expressing feeling, emotions and thoughts that are age-appropriate reflections of the child's abilities. For that reason educators should be looking at how children work instead of emphasising the outcome (Lowenfeld & Brittain, 2003).

Being creative involves critical thinking and the opportunity for new possibilities and ideas, in which the process of creating is just as important as the outcome. Creative thinking and literacy are connected and encourage new ways of understanding and making sense of the world (The Icelandic Curriculum Guide for Preschools, 2011). Drawing and making marks are young children's first steps to communicating information and being literate, especially when they are encouraged to verbally describe what they are doing and making. Educators play a major role in promoting young children's literacy, which is the basis of all learning. Visual literacy, the ability to interpret and make meaning of the environment through images, is the child's first step to literacy.

Teacher training programs influence what teachers learn and therefore teach. Various attitudes and emphasis on literacy therefore shape the child's first steps to literacy (Anning, 2003). Educators who keep up with new research and theories in art education, rather discuss creative thinking, social and communication skills, cooperation and well-being, instead of only emphasizing development stages, cognitive and sensory motor competencies in art making that were significantly popular in the past (Anning, 2003). Literacy can be promoted through visual art practices, and therefore educators' knowledge in how to support children's drawing is essential, as the task of drawing encourages skills that will enable children not only to write, but read in the future (Anning, 2003).

A three-year research, which followed seven children aged three to six years of age regarding their visual aspects of literacy and their graphic forms of creative expression, suggested that children's representations were rarely taken seriously (Anning, 2003). Attention to children's cognitive processes and observation of their personal and social skills that take place through their drawing is essential as it is when educators do not respond to or support children's drawings that they stop using them as a way of communication and draw less (Anning, 2003). The findings of a three-year research which looked at how art practices change cognition showed that children who had interest and motivation in art practices have improved attention and cognitive processes (Posner, Rothbart, Sheese & Kieras, 2008).

Visual arts practices encourage creativity in all areas of learning. Jeffery and Craft (2004) conceptualised possibility thinking as being central to creative learning, in which individuals faced with problems find ways of dealing with and solving them. They carried out a case study to identify and establish the characteristics of possibility thinking in creative learning with children aged three to seven, and observed how educators supported their thinking as a quality of creativity. The importance of documentation was emphasised in this study, as educators were observed in how they supported possibility thinking in children's learning from the viewpoint that it is a quality of their creative experience. The study showed that by reinforcing and encouraging children as explorers, helping them to work independently and be more decisive, as well as practicing possibility thinking, their sense of competence and confidence were strengthened and their interest in learning increased (Cremin, Burnard & Craft, 2006).

Visual art also offers areas of learning that encourage children's social and intellectual skills that are beneficial for learning to take place throughout their lives (Bamford, 2009), and supports children's nonverbal development and communication skills that provide opportunities for expressing their emotions.

2.1.3 Evoking emotions through art encourages learning

Art processes arouse the senses, emotions and general cognition. Studies on how individuals think and how they act, with emphasis on emotion, decision making, memory, communication and creativity, have shown that connections exist between rational thought and emotions. These emotions not only influence individuals' decision making, but also what they believe and how they act (Damasio, 1994). Encouraging emotional development seems therefore to be a main factor in building social skills, as it deals with

an individual's ability to not only recognize, sense, experience, and express experiences in a wide variety of ways, but also be able to respond and understand others' social and emotional communications (Olenchak & Gaa, 2010). Cognitive development is influenced by an individual's emotional development and activated by emotional stimuli that they interact with in their environment (Dewey, 1958). Emotions are merged in social functioning and decision making, and affect both learning and thought processes, as they are both connected to the body and the mind (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2011).

Information and experiences that are emotionally arousing are better remembered than those that are more neutral in nature. As emotional arousal results in changes in attention, the better the attention that takes place during the encoding process, the more easily the individual is able to recall information, which leads to long-term memory (Hardiman, Rinne, Gregory, & Yarmolinskaya, 2011). So when schools do not support and encourage social and emotional development that can be used in real-life situations, both children and educators are more likely not to reach their full potential (Olenchak & Gaa, 2010).

During the process of total engagement and involvement in creative processes that do not have any predetermined outcomes, positive experiences and emotions like joy, happiness and general well-being are felt; this Csikszentmihalyi (2002) calls flow. Art can evoke emotionally pleasurable experiences during the state of flow, where children are able to express themselves (Schirmacher, 1998), their emotions and interests, and how they learn, sense and understand their environment (Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1982). It is during these positive experiences that children's self-image and their abilities are strengthened, avenues for effective learning take place and their positive mental health thrives. Research has shown that children who are interested and motivated in art practices have greater attention and cognitive processes (Posner et al., 2008).

The freedom of creative expression allows children to interpret and express feelings and events that influence the way they see their world (Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1982). For children art is a form of expression, just like role play, and as they develop they are constantly aware of and try to make sense of their environment. This can be seen in the way they express how they feel, their thoughts and their interests through their art, and in doing so they express themselves as individuals (Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1982). I believe that educators need to be aware and use the opportunity to plan activities that support and encourage learning in educational settings where children are inspired and show interest. It is the educator's responsibility to guide and

stimulate observation and participation in a non-restrictive way so as to allow for freedom of creative thought, not only for an individual, but to benefit all who partake in the experience (Dewey, 1938/1997, p. 71)

The practice of visual art can be helpful in expressing and coping with negative feelings, like anger and fear, that may be difficult for children to speak about in verbal language (Rubin, 2005). Through visual art, children get to show who they are, how they feel and what they are capable of, and by doing so feel good about themselves and their abilities. Visual art is beneficial to children's cognitive, physical and emotional development, and has been used in art therapy, both for its therapeutic and educational value (Rubin, 2005).

Even though art and practical subjects have been overlooked in the past, there has been an increase in the understanding of how its practice stimulates and encourages creative thinking, social and communication skills and cooperation. Ways to recognise, support and promote the importance of these subjects as well as how better to use them in the school system have been emphasised in the Teachers Union Policy (2011).

2.2 Educators' knowledge and understanding of arts

Educators' awareness and their ability to communicate children's learning experiences through art, and not merely see it as an activity that promotes products, is reflected in how it is offered and the quality of learning that takes place. The quality of teaching and the quality of the curriculum are two important aspects that influence both teachers and children's education and learning. Education that is offered through and in art encourages creativity and helps meet these demands. Emphasis on teachers' education and knowledge is essential, as the quality of arts education depends upon well-educated art teachers. For creativity to be more than inspiring words there needs to be an understanding of the curriculum so that educators may be confident in choosing how best to work and be sufficient in their practices (Dewey, 1938/2000). Teachers and principals who have knowledge and understanding of art and who share the same views and values towards art education are more able and likely to collaborate, share their experiences and support each other in offering quality art education (Unesco, 2006).

2.2.1 Educators' knowledge and skills

Educators' knowledge goes beyond working by the book and following rigid timetables; their enthusiasm and interest in what they are teaching becomes contagious and will influence and ignite children's interest to learn. The continuous interactions that take place between educators and their

students require educators to be fully engaged with their mind, body and soul (McDermot, 2013). Educators who are aware of the different types of communication are more able to understand what children are doing, saying and learning. For this to be successful, various opportunities and ample time for exploration and communication open possibilities for children to have meaningful personal experiences (Dewey, 1938/1997). Preschools in Reggio Emilia are well known for their creative work with young children in environments that are stimulating not only for their children but their educators as well. Educators in Reggio Emilia believe that children are capable individuals who need to express themselves in a multitude of ways with various materials for learning to take place. These educators, with the help and cooperation of an *atelierista* who has a background in visual art, document children's creative encounters so as to better understand how and what they are learning (Gandini, Hill, Cadwell & Schwall, 2005).

Eisner (2002) emphasises that for art teachers to be inspiring and understand their students' abilities and development, it is essential that they are confident in what they are teaching, have knowledge and understanding of pedagogy and the sensory aspects of art as well as technical and particular art skills. He also discusses how students' abilities and attitudes towards art are often shaped by and reflect their teachers' attitudes and how they teach. Even with this knowledge, educators often feel unprepared and insecure as to how to practice and encourage young children's participation in the visual arts (Cole, 2012). Therefore knowledge of theories is important but not enough on its own, as an understanding and passion for inspiring others through the transfer of knowledge into practice is necessary (Eisner, 2002). When that is accomplished, educators will have a better understanding of how their views influence and determine how they teach and what situations children learn in (Dewey, 1938/2000).

Often educators find themselves faced with various dilemmas when teaching visual art. They may feel insecure, not knowing when to stand back and allow for total freedom, or when to take charge (Craft, Cremin, Burnard & Chappell, 2007). Both the over-structured, predetermined lesson and the indifferent educator may inhibit children reaching their full potential creativity and hinder them from working independently (Craft et al., 2007). Research on a national level into arts and creativity in Iceland revealed that a major factor that contributes to staff insecurity and other dilemmas that arise when teaching visual art is the lack of artistic skill and knowledge (Bamford, 2009). Evidence shows that there is a lack of artistic and communication skills, a need for a better understanding of creative processes, and the absence of awareness of the benefits of art and creativity

in education among teachers, including those newly graduated from their studies (Bamford, 2009).

Positive learning environments lead to positive experiences where enthusiastic educators with contagious attitudes influence and ignite children's interest to learn (Dewey, 1938/1997). According to Eisner (2002), teachers who teach art should have confidence, knowledge of pedagogy and understanding, both of technical skills and in art processes, to inspire and question their students' creative abilities. Whereas teachers who are not passionate, or do not have an understanding of the sensory aspects of art, are not able to teach art well and that reflects directly in their students' artistic abilities (Eisner, 2002). The *atelierista*, a specialist in art education in Reggio Emilia schools, works by encouraging communication through various creative mediums and supports teachers and children in working creatively. They have oversight with the materials that are available and how they are offered, and ensure that the preschool environment is stimulating for both children and educators (Gandini et al., 2005). When educators understand what children are doing, saying and learning from their experiences, they are more likely to offer and support their learning in a variety of ways (Dewey, 1938/1997).

Educators' ability to reach out and inspire children in visual art does not solely depend on them specialising as art teachers. Educators should rather have a combination of skills, knowledge and the belief in the value of art education (Valsdóttir, 2009). It is in art that "the playful attitude becomes interest in transformation of material to serve the purpose of a developing experience" (Dewey, 1934/1997, p. 291). When educators are flexible in how they teach, are aware and interested in children's ideas and take part in their projects, they are more likely to inspire and connect with them in meaningful emotional experiences that encourage further learning (Dewey, 1934/1997). Pedagogical skills that are specifically related to teaching art not only help teachers feel confident in how they teach children visual art, but also have a positive impact on children's learning (Bamford, 2009; Eisner, 2002). Having the skills and knowledge of materials, the ability to capture children's attention, stimulate their imagination, encourage their creativity and interest for experimentation are a central part of an accomplished art educator. For without these skills and knowledge educators may not be able to assist children, and could even inhibit their creative process (Eisner, 2002).

It is essential for educators to know how to be supportive and constructive in their communication about children's art if they want to build their self-esteem and encourage critical thinking, as without this knowledge

children could be discouraged in their ability and lose interest (Eisner, 2002). For those educators who need assistance with their teaching practices, scaffolding could be a relevant possibility. Scaffolding, according to Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976), is the term given to the act of assistance by a more knowledgeable or competent individual to another who is less knowledgeable. The assistance given by the tutor enables the learner to gain confidence while learning tasks which would otherwise not have been achieved. Once the learner feels confident, the tutor moves away, leaving the learner to proceed with confidence (Wood et al., 1976).

2.2.2 Documentation and continuous learning

Observation and documentation of children's learning could benefit those educators who are insecure about how best to teach visual art. These practices make children's learning and development visible and assist educators in understanding how best to work in supporting children as well as knowing when to give freedom to work independently. Pedagogical documentation can be described as visual listening, where not only children's learning but the educators' understanding of what and how children learn are the focus of their discussion, reflection and analysis (Rinaldi, 2006). Documentation and reflection, done individually or by a team, is not only beneficial to understanding children's learning processes, but enables educators to analyse how they work and improve how they interact and support children's creative learning. Documentation is also beneficial to communicate and make visible, information about the value and purpose of creativity in children's education, to parents as well as educators (Craft et al., 2007).

Another way to support teachers in teaching visual art confidently is through continuous learning that is offered within workplaces or by municipalities. Preschool educators feel that they have little time for continuous education during working hours, but rather take courses in their own time. Others depend on courses that preschool principals choose, where more often they have to choose between what is being offered and not what is needed (Bamford, 2009). The more educators know about creativity and imagination and visual art practices the easier it is to work with the possibilities it offers (Egan, 1992).

Children are naturally creative but do not automatically learn what is being taught, rather they learn from a combination of their interactions with others, their participation and their interaction in situations with various resources (Malaguzzi, 1998). Educators who are able to recall their childhood

and connect with their students through common areas of interest like art are more likely to offer opportunities for positive learning experiences to take place (Korn-Bursztyn, 2012). By reflecting on how one was taught and one's experiences, educators may become aware of how their personal awareness of the cycle of teaching and learning becomes apparent (Ginsberg, Mast & Snow, 2010).

2.2.3 Environments and educators' professionalism

Children's education is influenced and reflected directly by their environment and their educators' attitudes to teaching. Bandura (1971) points out that most behaviour is learned through the influence of example and observation, instead of solely through trial and error. The professional educator's role is to create learning environments that assist in provoking interest and curiosity to learn. Children need access to a variety of art materials and time to explore them, a supportive teacher who knows when to back off and when to encourage in ways that enhance their students' thinking (Eisner, 2002). For learning to be interesting and meaningful to children, educators could offer materials, projects and opportunities that reflect their children's interests (Eisner, 2002), and support them in the transfer of knowledge and experiences into their daily life (Dewey, 1997/2000; Eisner, 2002).

Learning and experiencing various skills or tasks within isolated areas usually only benefits future experiences in similar areas. Whereas learning and experiencing in ways that connect, support and strengthen other learning areas are more beneficial to education as a whole (Dewey, 1938/1997). Experiences that individuals encounter take place when they interact with their environments to meet their personal needs and interests (Dewey, 1938/1997). When Cuffaro (1995, p. 72) said that experiences "are had, not given", she meant that even though teachers can be part of an experience with children, they can only create environments for personal experiences to take place. In their contemplations and preparations educators can be aware and ensure that all children have the opportunity to work, learn and develop through real-life experiences, keeping in mind that experiences are only educational if they facilitate growth, creativity and new experiences (Dewey, 1938/2000).

Actions and decisions on what and how to teach visual art are reflected in personal views and how education is valued (Caffaro, 1995). By reflecting on these views and values it may become clearer to educators that the way they react and respond to objects, situations and visual art practices are depicted

by their past experiences and affect working processes (Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1982). After exploring and observing visual art activities for a week in a preschool in Sweden, and thereafter interviewing preschool educators regarding their personal experiences, attitudes and views, Karlson (2011) found that teachers had traditional ideas of how children's artistic abilities naturally develop with time. The same educators felt that children should have complete freedom for self-expression, with no importance on the teacher role. Bamford (2009) and Karlson (2011) found that teachers were insecure in teaching art, as they felt that not enough time was given to art-related subjects in their studies to become teachers. Karlson (2011) noticed differences between how preschool teachers and preschool assistants communicate with children and how they presented art activities and materials. He also saw clear differences in how and what educators intend to teach and what children actually learned.

Research examining the views, roles and pedagogy of preschool educators in Iceland showed that the roles of preschool teachers and preschool assistants were vague, which often inhibited preschool teachers using their specialized knowledge (Einarsdóttir, Jónsdóttir, & Garðarsdóttir, 2013). The same research indicated that preschool teachers supervised arts, music and creative expression, and placed more emphasis on culture and the arts than the preschool assistants (Einarsdóttir, Jónsdóttir, and Garðarsdóttir, 2013). Karlsson (2011) believes that dilemmas in visual arts practices arise when visual arts are not viewed for more than their skills and are due to educators' lack of knowledge of aesthetic matters. When educators do not reflect on these matters, visual art practices and views are in danger of reverting to how they were practiced in the past.

2.2.4 Professional attitudes towards visual art

Educators are individuals who have preferences, attitudes, views, ideas and past experiences that influence how they teach. Self-reflection is a way for educators to learn about how they teach and grow professionally. Preschool teachers are said to place more emphasis on culture and the arts than preschool assistants, and more often supervise work relating to arts, music and creative expression (Einarsdóttir, Jónsdóttir, & Garðarsdóttir, 2013). Accomplished educators are well-rounded individuals and role models who are able to share knowledge and have good communication skills. They need to have a good sense of self, know their strengths and weaknesses as well as their limitations (McDermott, 2013). Pedagogy, personality and attitudes are reflected in the way educators work, and with this awareness principals can

help staff reflect on what and how they have taught in the past, and assist in planning how best to work in the future (McDermot, 2013).

Principals' previous experiences, emotions and attitudes towards visual art affect how they support their staff practices and the quality learning opportunities they offer them, especially as this affects their children's education in this area. There is a relationship between experience, attitude and behaviour, as every experience, positive or negative, affects our attitudes, which helps decide if we take part in them again, as well as influences the quality of the future experience (Dewey, 1938/1959). Principals are educational leaders, and for visual arts education to flourish it is imperative that they show interest and have a positive attitude towards its practice, as they have the potential to affect how it is implemented in their schools (Leuhram, 2002).

Principals who have little experience or interest in the value of visual arts in education influence and define how art education is practiced in their schools (Leuhram, 2002). When educators have a good working environment where colleagues and principals are supportive and interested in the way that they work, they are able to work more professionally, experience a sense of well-being and are more likely to stay longer in their workplace (Valsdóttir, 2009).

Principals play a major role in encouraging and supporting quality learning, for both their educators and children, where they offer them opportunities and environments within their schools where children are encouraged to research, continue learning, promote their self-expression and learn to appreciate culture. Positive experiences and attitudes towards visual arts in education promotes an appreciation for art, and places it on a higher standard of importance within society and schools (Fowler, 1996).

Even though principals and school management have to deal with the dilemma of capable teachers who underachieve, I feel that this is an area that is often overlooked and seldom discussed. Olenchak and Gaa (2010) examined the negative effects of underachievement, and brought attention to the fact that little time or support was given to talented teachers. They found that due to insufficient support, capable teachers underachieved not only in their workplace, but socially and emotionally as well. Those teachers who do not get to use their skills and knowledge felt less competent than they really were and often quit their job. Students and teachers alike who work in environments that fail to acknowledge their strengths and capabilities will never get to exercise and develop their individual talents (Olenchak & Gaa, 2010).

2.3 Summary

In this chapter two themes were introduced. The first, creativity and arts education, dealt with influences of culture on education, how materials encourage and stimulate children's development in various learning areas, and how emotions evoked through art practices encourage learning. The second theme introduces educators' understanding of the arts for it to be beneficial to teaching, where documentation and continuous learning are mentioned as ways for educators to better understand their working processes, and how educators' professional attitudes towards visual arts not only influence how it is taught but also how children experience it first-hand.

The next chapter discusses the methods that were used in this research, which investigates how eight educators view and value visual art education in preschools. The findings will be discussed, connected to theory and the suggestions and conclusion presented.

3 Research methods

In this chapter I describe the methods, the goal and purpose of the research project. I thereafter describe the processing of data, validity and credibility and its value.

3.1 Goal and purpose

The goal of this research was to investigate and look for answers to how preschool educators view, experience and value visual art in preschools. I wanted to find out if and how they may affect the way they offer preschool children opportunities for working in visual art. The research question was: How is preschool visual art education valued, experienced and viewed?

3.2 Participants

A purposive sample of participants was chosen with the belief that they would be beneficial to the research (Þórlindsson & Karlsson, 2003). They were chosen with regard to their length of working experience, age and education, so as to represent the diversity of preschool educators and to see if there were any common factors between. The participants are all practicing educators, coming from 4 preschools. Of the eight participants, all female preschool educators, three are principals and one is a vice principal, two are preschool teachers and three are teacher assistants with no pedagogical education. The participants in managerial positions are Rebekka, Isabella and Gabriella, all with more than 20 years' experience each. The preschool teachers are Victoria and Diana, with more than 15 years' experience each. Lastly the preschool assistants: Rose with 6 months experience, Isabella 1 years' experience and Ashley 2 years' experience. I will not disclose which town the research is carried out in, but will refer to the larger Reykjavík area.

Preschool managers were included in this research to investigate how their attitudes, views and practices towards visual art influence the way they encourage and support its practices within their schools.

All participants were contacted in person or by telephone asking if they were interested in taking part. They all agreed to partake and thereafter I personally delivered a letter (see appendix 1), prior to the interview, introducing the research and explaining what kind of questions they could

expect. The letter also informed participants that they would be referred to under a pseudonym, and that all information that they shared would be considered confidential and only used for the purpose of this research.

3.3 Data collection

The data collected was of a personal nature as it dealt with experiences, values and views, and therefore qualitative research methods were chosen. Qualitative research methods were used to gain a better understanding of participants' personal experiences (Dávíðsdóttir, 2003). Interviews are commonly used in collecting data for qualitative research and were chosen as they are a suitable means of communicating delicate and complicated interactions of thoughts, emotions, perceptions, views and knowledge, between the researcher and the participants (Jónsdóttir, 2003).

Open questions (see appendix 3) were used in the interviews, and gave participants the opportunity to answer freely, in their own way and in their own time. Open questions were especially useful as they gave more insight and depth to participants' thoughts, experiences and memories which could strengthen the results of this research (Jónsdóttir, 2003).

The questions were purposefully categorised into three parts to help with the flow of the interview, starting with general questions and continuing with more specific questions (Jónsdóttir, 2003). The first questions dealt with general personal information and first memories of being creative. The second set of questions related to experiences of teaching visual arts to preschool children. Lastly, the third category related to how visual art is practiced and what children learn from doing it.

The data was collected from interviews taken between February and April 2014. The interviews took approximately one hour each. All the participants decided that they would prefer the interviews take place during working hours, so the interviews took place at their workplaces in a closed interview room, so as not to be disturbed.

3.4 Validity and credibility

Interviews were taken and transcribed in Icelandic; thereafter they were coded and categorised in English. The researcher was aware that misconceptions in translation could threaten the credibility and validity of the research, and had to continuously question if the participants were understood and if the participants understood the questions (Halldórsdóttir, 2003).

As the data collected was personal in nature, the question could arise as to whether the subtleties in some of the meanings are lost in translation, or if they were fully captured by the researcher. I was aware that language reflects not only culture, but personal experiences, knowledge and abilities, controls how we think, our perception and the things we do (Jónsdóttir, 2003). I kept these factors in mind while categorising and translating the data into English, so as to avoid misunderstandings.

3.5 Ethical issues

Human rights are ethical issues that need to be considered; with regard to respect for participants' privacy and to ensure that it would not be possible to trace information to any of the participants or their workplaces, all participants were given pseudonyms. As the population of Iceland is small and even though there are many preschools, information regarding participants' characteristics, age, working experience and education could risk them being identified (Kristinsson, 2003).

All participants were given a letter of consent (see appendix 2) to sign prior to the interview that stated that they could quit whenever they wanted to and had complete freedom to say what they wanted as all information was confidential. It is important that participants are aware that personal information is confidential, as it creates a more comfortable atmosphere when taking the interview (Jónsdóttir, 2003).

3.6 Documentation and processing of information

Notes were taken straight after each interview regarding emotions, the atmosphere and other nuances that may have been noticeable. The interviews were transcribed within hours of being taken and then coded, keeping in mind the notes that had been taken earlier. By documenting and processing the information as soon as it was possible, while the memories were still fresh, it was easier to recall and reflect on what came as a surprise and what the atmosphere was like (Jónsdóttir, 2003).

Once all the transcribing was complete, the data was coded into categories. The categories were re-categorised until refined themes emerged. Dye, Schatz, Rosenberg and Coleman (2000) used the kaleidoscope metaphor to explain the ongoing process of categorising data, until the final categories emerge refined. Categorising is crucial to the analysing process as it is the basis for the grouping and conceptualizing of data. Categorising also has to be meaningful for the data to be understood in context. Through

further comparison and re-examination of the categories, new categories are formed (Dey, 1993).

The two main categories that emerged are *creativity* and *teachers*. The themes connected to *creativity* were: first creative experiences, visual art practices, what children learn through art and dilemmas facing quality art education. The findings will be introduced in the fourth chapter, discussed with reference to theory in the fifth chapter, and in the sixth chapter the results will be presented.

4 Findings

In this chapter there are two main areas of discussion. The first deals with creativity and the second preschool educators. Each subchapter ends with a short reflection that will be discussed later in more detail in chapter six.

4.1 Creative art practices

The participants all used the word creativity (sköpun) when discussing visual art/art (myndlist/list), both when referring to pre-determined craft projects or when children got to work freely on their own ideas in a creative manner. There was not a clear difference in how participants described children creating through craft or children who work creatively with their own ideas. The process of children making something with a predetermined outcome was sometimes mentioned as offering opportunity for encouraging creativity. Even though creativity is stimulated and encouraged through art practices, it is not confined to art, and can be found in other areas of study, professions or in daily life.

4.1.1 First creative experiences

Diana smiled and then laughed as she reflected on her childhood experiences. She had never contemplated how her childhood experiences might have shaped and influenced how she works today and how she values creativity in her everyday life.

I took a stick and drew in the gravel at home. Now that you mention it, that is right, I drew all kind of things there, in the sand. It was such a lot of fun, because I am that old, I used the sand. There was a gravel road in front of my house, there I used a stick to draw hop scotch and other things, drew all kinds. I recall making a secret place. I stacked stones, and the secret in this secret place were beautiful pieces of glass. I have never thought of it. I was just being creative. Yes, this is a memory dance. Memories and creativity, I have never thought of it as such.

Rebekka's first memories of making art in school were restrained and non-creative, unlike creating outdoors. There she had ample time and

opportunity to create freely, use her imagination and solve problems. She planned and built houses and farms out of driftwood and fence posts that were as long as two to three meters.

We could build whole houses, like semi-detached and town houses by laying them in a cross ... we were clearly creating. The question is if it is art or not ... like architects ... we thought of where the rooms had to be, recesses ... and calculate how we could have openings for doorways so that we could close them. It was the same when we played farm, we imagined, we created ... we built ... whole farms with fences ... all from our own experience of the world we knew.

Thinking back, Rose remembers spending a lot of time outdoors, where her father gave her ample time and encouragement to see the beauty in nature. He often pointed out the colours in the mountains, the shadows and the shapes in the clouds. Back home, Rose enjoyed a rich creative environment, surrounded by art materials and her parents' discussions relating to art and artists. There was always more than enough paper, pencils and paints lying around, due to her father's art work, so she spent a lot of her time drawing. Rose remembers her father's attention to detail when making toys out of recycled materials and how much fun it was playing with them on the kitchen floor. Looking back, she is convinced that the creative environment she was brought up in influenced the way she perceives and works with art today.

Images of playing in the sand and making mud pies decorated with colourful flowers go through Gabriella's mind as she recalls her very first artistic experience. Stones, shells, bones and other natural materials were in abundance in the nature surrounding her house, where she spent a lot of time playing freely as a child. In Gabriella's memory, she and her family were always making and creating something. Even though recycled materials, that both her parents collected, were mostly used, all kinds of handcraft were encouraged. Her mother taught her to knit and crochet, but it was her grandfather's photography she loved pondering over that sparked an interest within her which still lives on today. Even though creativity was significant in her life, she was never confident in drawing. In drawing classes in school she never got to use her imagination and draw what she wanted, but rather had to copy predetermined pictures that her teacher supplied. To this day she feels that she is not good at drawing, but hopes to be able to do so in the future. Now she is aware of the important role her parents played,

not only in supporting and giving time to be creative, but showing interest and taking part in what was being done. Through these childhood experiences, Gabriella expresses a joy and positive attitude towards art making and creativity, and feels it follows and influences her in the way she works to this day.

Sitting in the window, learning to knit, with her grandmother patiently looking on, was Bella's first recollection of being creative. It was a frustrating experience, as even though the stitches seemed to move from one needle over to the other as they should, the knitting never grew longer. She soon gave up and it was only many years later she tried again, and succeeded. Fond memories of playing in nature, building farms and houses and whatever else she could imagine at the time, was as clear as yesterday in her mind. The only recollection of playing freely indoors was building with Lego cubes. They were kept in a very large box in the basement, and there she would sit for hours building in peace. Even though her name is forgotten, Bella still recalled a young innovative art teacher who was open to working in unconventional ways. She looked forward to her classes, as she enjoyed experimenting both with recycled and natural materials. It was in these classes that she got to work on projects that she enjoyed, as she felt as though she was contributing and not just following instructions. She later learned to present her work in creative and unconventional ways which she was proud to do. The fact that girls were not allowed to take part in woodwork was something that Bella could not understand. And she very proudly took part in a protest march to express her disappointment.

Feelings of being insecure and not being able to accomplish what was expected of her, Viktoria emphasised that she did not have positive memories of drawing classes in school. Everyone had to copy a picture or draw an object, but had no say in the matter. The teacher decided what was being done and how to do it without explaining, so she never learned how and felt like she failed at what was expected of her. Viktoria lowered her voice and looked down at the table in front of her. She explained it was "the awful feeling of being rushed" when she worked with clay. She felt she needed time to work but due to the fact that she was "always rushed and never happy with the outcome" she disliked having to work with clay. Unlike these negative experiences, the times spent outdoors were positive and enjoyable. Viktoria emphasised how much fun it was to be able to work freely with whatever natural materials she found.

4.1.1.1 On reflection

Both positive and negative experiences of art and creativity in childhood strongly reflect in the educators' attitudes towards visual art. Educators who have a passion for what they teach, who support and encourage children to learn are shown to offer positive experiences. These positive experiences are associated with emotions of inspiration and willing to learn more, feelings of accomplishment and overall well-being. Whereas educators who have little interest in what they are teaching or their students' ideas and interests, who follow standardised projects and have unrealistic expectations of their students have students who leave their classes with negative experiences. It is these experiences that discourage learning and interest in what is being taught and often feelings of incompetence and lowered self-esteem.

These findings indicate that experiences of art and creativity in childhood are strongly reflected in educators' attitudes towards visual art. It shows that not only what is being taught, but how it is being taught is of great importance, as emotions and experiences affect not only the present but long into the future.

4.1.2 What children learn by making art

Rebekka believes that children who have been given opportunities to create freely learn more about themselves and have better communication skills. For these reasons she encourages her staff to keep avenues for creativity open. By offering a multitude of opportunities she feels individual needs will be met.

The purpose is not to turn individuals into artists or that they have an immeasurable interest in art history or art in general. Even though it is ok if that happens, is not the purpose. The purpose is that the child finds himself, find his possibilities, his path.

Imagination, increased concentration, fine motor skills and learning how to use materials by experimentation are all areas that Isabella feels children learn and develop through working creatively in visual arts. "Especially as we are used to using iPads, we need to increase children's imagination, encourage them to find answers firsthand, and learn to work independently". She believes that children today have so much information at their fingertips that they rarely have to investigate, explore and experiment to find answers. By being aware of how art practices promote

development and learning, Isabella encourages children to come up with ideas for projects and find creative ways to execute them.

Even though Rose has not much experience of working in a preschool, she quickly noticed how receptive children are to learning. Being aware of her environment from an early age, she understood how it shapes and influences those in it. The one thing that surprised her most though was how children behaved in a group. She witnessed “herd behaviour” in how children with the strongest character lead and influenced the group. When making art it was evident to her that children often copied those who were more competent, and when the group lost interest it was often due to the strongest individuals wanting to do something else. Through art, Rose believes that children are able to research and discover how to use materials while exercising fine motor skills. Even though self-control, patience and concentration are strengthened when working on art projects, she feels they are not always acknowledged as they are not visible products of their work.

In the process of art making, Diana believes children connect to and express their past experiences, their wishes, emotions and imagination. During her many years of experience and study of creativity, she perceives how children understand and interact with the environment through the use of their senses.

Children draw; they have the need to draw what they are thinking. They do not just draw to draw; there is always something behind it. I am one hundred percent sure that of that. Emotions and expressions are brought out through all the art disciplines. Children connect to art, no matter how you look at it. Children feel good after doing it. They sometimes come into the art room in a bad mood, but seldom go out in a bad mood. Yes, they just enjoy taking part.

In Viktoria’s opinion children learn and develop skills when working on art projects, and hopes they feel contented when their work produces outcomes they are happy with. She finds naming the area of learning difficult, but after short reflection it became clearer to her that not only colour and shape recognition were being learned, but mathematics and cooperation as well. She believes that adults often restrict children’s creativity, as she experienced as a child, but when children are trusted with their ideas “amazing things can come into being”.

Gabriella views children's art making as a creative, playful process through which children are able to communicate their emotions. Because play and creativity come naturally to children, she believes it to be a suitable mode of promoting self-esteem and independence. For this to be successful she is aware that children need to learn and gain knowledge through first-hand experiences.

The illustrations in children's books, Bella believes, are the child's first connection to visual art. For that reason she carefully chooses books that are well written and have good quality illustrations. She feels that in doing so children are not only introduced to different styles of drawing, but learn various communication and literacy skills. With many years of experience behind her, Bella is very much aware that art teaches more than just skills using art materials and tools. She has seen how its practice promotes children's creative thinking, their self-esteem and trust in their abilities and instincts to work independently. Bella is confident that creative and critical thinking, trust, tolerance and respect for one's own and others' work are all learned when working on art projects in groups or alone.

With not a lot of working experience and little knowledge of the art making process, Ashley still enjoys and looks forward to drawing and painting with children. She gets a lot of enjoyment out of taking part herself and sees how children's imagination and creativity are stimulated, especially when they get to work independently. When she compliments children on their work she has noticed how proud the children are and how it boosts their self-confidence.

4.1.2.1 On reflection

At first it seemed as though the participants were not confident in articulating what children learned through visual art practices, as they emphasised certain learning areas more than others. Whereas after processing and reflection on the data, it became apparent that visual art practices stimulate and encourage academic and life skills, strengthen self-confidence and give a feeling of well-being. Further analysis showed that these areas are connected to the mind, body and soul. This, I conclude, shows that individuals learn not in isolated areas, but with their whole being, where complicated connections among the three combine during the learning process.

4.1.3 How art is practiced in preschools

All of Rebekka's staff are expected to offer children work in visual arts, and are encouraged to find various ways of doing so. In her opinion, educators' creative limitations were due to how willing and able they were to practice art. Her experience of working with a creative mentor has shown her that when staff are encouraged and supported in their visual art and creative practices, they become more active and are more willing to work towards the school's visions and goals. She expresses the importance of creative mentors being preschool teachers. Firstly, they have a better understanding of how children learn and develop, and, secondly, they have insight and knowledge of creative practices and the ability to connect and influence how others work.

In Isabella's workplace, projects are both predetermined by teachers as well as originated by children's ideas and interest. She envisions that her role as an educator is to support children while they work freely and know when to step back. When working freely within a frame, she feels most confident and believes that children concentrate more and feel secure when working in the same way. When children enjoy themselves and feel good about making art, Isabella gets confirmation that she is doing a good job.

Diana's daily routine comprises working with groups in the art area, as well as encouraging and supporting educators in working creatively. With the use of children's books she ignites children's interest and from there works on different areas of learning.

In each project, when I work in groups, I emphasise Icelandic, emphasise mathematics, emphasise visual arts, music and movement. That is how I work, depending on what is associated with the book. Mathematics, then we find something that we can count, something that is big or small, it just depends on the book that we use. ... there are a lot of Icelandic words and sentences to look at. What does it mean? What are they telling us? Then pictures, ... how can we draw a picture from it, and if we can put on a play then we put on a play.

Independent thought, creativity and an active imagination are all areas that are encouraged through art in Rose's workplace. Even though she is competent and confident in her own art making skills, she was not sure that she could work in the same manner with children. Even with her limited experience of working in a preschool, she feels that she is able to encourage

children to use their ideas and work independently on their art projects. The obstacles she feels she has to overcome are the lack of space to work in and the materials that are available in the art room. Even though her confidence grows as time goes by, she feels the need for insight into how children learn through art and ideas on how better to work.

With emphasis put on creative practices and the use of recycled materials in her workplace, Viktoria feels that it is her responsibility as head teacher to make these materials available to her staff and encourage them to use it when working with children, both in the classroom and art rooms.

In Bella's preschool, educators are encouraged to have materials easily accessible, so that children have the opportunity to work freely and experiment with new materials. Some educators work on pre-planned projects while others work on projects that children decide upon in groups or individually. Factors that she feels influence the way her staff work are their working conditions and environment, positive role models and encouragement from co-workers. In her opinion, staff who become aware of the happiness and joy that children experience from their art making will be more inspired to find new ways for children to explore and experiment with materials.

Most of the art projects in Ashley's preschool are decided beforehand by teachers and practiced by the older children, who get more opportunity to make art than the younger children. The reason for that is that the older children work on projects while the younger children are resting after lunch.

4.1.3.1 On reflection

Preschool educators' creative and visual art practices vary depending on their attitude, experience, education and interest. The managers who have oversight of their schools believe that visual art could be practiced more creatively, but it is not due to the staff's lack of knowledge and understanding. Those who work directly with children believe that they work well considering their general knowledge and understanding of visual arts practices.

4.1.4 Dilemmas in the workplace

Due not only to high educator turnover but lack of understanding, knowledge and belief in working creatively and the understanding of how children learn with regards to their age and abilities, Rebekka explains the dilemma she often faces when trying to work according to the working methods the school has decided to strive for.

The idea is that we reach out and grab children's ideas, support and work with them to implement and find solutions, ... and not to tell them how to draw a tree, and the tree is always brown with green leaves or, ... we do not want to give that message but we have educator turnover and it has been very difficult to get them to work according to these methods... it depends a lot on the individual and how they have developed professionally and their work background, ... I get educated individuals who do not believe in freedom and do not believe that they can create independently, they often correct the children.

Guidance and continuous learning are what Rebekka believes is the answer for professional development in the workplace, both for experienced and unexperienced educators. With the high staff turnover, she feels that on-the-job continuous learning is the answer for both new staff and educated teachers who may need support and guidance on various levels when practicing visual art. In her experience, the help of a creative mentor has managed to offer staff the assistance and guidance they required to work more creatively.

As an educated preschool teacher with many years' experience who specialised in creative studies, Diana works by integrating learning areas with music, movement, visual arts and drama. She feels that her knowledge is not as beneficial as she expected due to the limited knowledge and understanding of her co-workers.

People are stuck in the idea that visual arts are painting and craft and the like, music is another and movement is something else, so that has spoiled it for me,...to work as I want to, as an educator ... to work in a more focused way in the school.

In Gabriella's opinion, staff's negative attitudes are contagious and "working in art is seen all too often as a problem".

A problem, you decide that it is a problem, but the problem can also be a project that has to be solved. You need to work on a project, maybe in a different way than you intended, or have done before, that does not mean that it has to be a problem. It could turn out to be much more interesting and easier by trying it in some other way. Half the problem has got to do with attitudes.

Art entails the extra work of preparing and tidying away, but because Gabriella was brought up to believe that it was part of the process and not a problem, it does not bother her. In her experience, she feels that her co-workers do not share the same views on the matter and often find working with art bothersome. One of the differences is regarding the use of recycled materials, as some staff would prefer shop-bought craft materials. No matter how the school tries to encourage the use of recycled materials, she knows that her co-workers see it as junk and refuse to use it, as they feel “it is too much work”. Even though Gabriella’s workplace has well-equipped art rooms and sufficient classroom space, she is always surprised when her co-workers used the art room for free play rather than art projects when they have allocated time there.

Gabriella connects her rich childhood experiences of art and creativity to how she works with it today. For that reason she is passionate about offering children various opportunities that could spark their interest to want to learn and experience enjoyment while doing so. When reflecting on her co-workers’ lack of interest towards teaching visual arts, she is aware that it could have a similar effect on the children. The problem she sees is that it may not only have an effect today but follow them into adulthood.

Even though educators are encouraged to work creatively, listen to children’s ideas and use them in art projects, the managers all felt that their educators’ work processes were not always unified and sometimes went against their school policies and curriculum.

Bella has worked in the same position for many years and still finds her job rewarding, enjoying the challenge of being able to implement and develop ideas. Her preschool has ample space and yet educators would rather use the art room for free play. She was shocked to learn that open-ended and recycled materials, which were chosen for the purpose of encouraging creativity, were discarded in exchange for traditional toys. Bella feels that her preschool offers good facilities and environment to work creatively; however, more often than not, staff opt for children doing the same work in exactly the same way. After much contemplation and reflection, Bella questions whether her staff gets enough encouragement and support or if the daily routine restricts the way they work. Whatever the reason, she is aware that more emphasis should be placed on staff participation in offering art and creative practices.

Most of the participants recalled their art lessons as uninteresting experiences, where educators did not show interest or creativity in how they taught. Rebekka recalled her primary school teacher who was an artist who

could draw and play the piano very well, but was not able to teach or work creatively when working with children.

I have a definite picture in my mind of the primary school that I was in. We were often made to draw and copy. I was good at that and found it exciting to choose a picture to copy. Just as well I had good self-esteem. I often wondered about the creativity. Was it to find new ways to draw by copying? I remember when I found a clever way to draw a pine tree, by drawing lines of different lengths. Was it part of finding new ways of drawing? There was still no freedom in it. We decorated out workbooks even though there was no one who asked us to do so. I remember we were always decorating; it did not matter for which subject it was. It was there that I got to express myself through my drawing.

In recollection of her school days, Diana recalls that there was not much creativity, but teacher-orientated standardisation. When drawing or doing handcrafts she was told what and how to work, never getting to decide for herself, never experiencing firsthand from experimentation. It was in her postgraduate studies that Diana experienced enjoyment of learning to draw in depth. Before that time she had never understood how to do it because she was never taught as a child.

Rose had similar experiences of school art where students copied pictures year after year. She feels that this way of working would have been acceptable if all she had to learn was fine motor skills or colour, but as professionals, educators should have known better. She believes that it is the role of the educator to offer children projects that inspire and evoke positive emotions which encourage them to learn. She shares other participants' views on how educators' attitudes and teaching practices should be carefully reflected on as they affect the way children work and learn.

Even though it has been many decades since Gabriella graduated from school, she still remembers two particular teachers and how they presented work to their students. One taught handcrafts, and she inspired her students to work by being supportive, encouraging and complimenting them on their work. She felt inspired to work in her classes. The second was a drawing teacher who never showed interest or enthusiasm in what he was doing or teaching and where she only got to copy. She would have preferred to have had some freedom to draw in his classes.

Even though some of Ashley’s experience at art school was not positive, because she felt she was not very good, she enjoyed it anyway. She vividly remembered two of her art teachers; one was strict and controlling and the projects were pre-determined. The other was easy-going, encouraging and complimented her students. She felt that she enjoyed and learned more from the easy-going teacher who made her lessons exciting and interesting while encouraging her students.

4.1.4.1 On reflection

Managers seem to be aware of staff who are insecure, and need guidance and continuous learning. They, however, do not seem to be able to meet these needs due to a lack of time, money and appropriate training, which is complicated due to high staff turnover.

The findings also indicate that teachers’ actions and attitudes influence children’s learning.

4.2 Educators: influences, education and inspiration

The following sub-chapters discuss how various factors contribute to educator’s attitudes, knowledge and how visual arts are practiced.

4.2.1 Influences on educators

Table 1 shows influences that participants believe affect how they and others work, with regard to how visual art is practiced in their preschools. These influences have been categorised into two main groups. The one group is related to educators’ inner influences and the other educators’ external influences.

Table 1: Influences on preschool educators

Educators’ inner influences	Educators’ external influences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Education ❖ Attitudes ❖ Enthusiasm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Availability of education and training ❖ Availability of materials

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Emotional experience ❖ Working and living in the present 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Influences from students and co-workers ❖ Opportunities for experiencing firsthand ❖ Daily routine
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Participants believe that education and on-the-job training, as well as support from co-workers, are important in encouraging them to work well and feel secure in what they are doing. They are also aware that to be able to work in ways that stimulate and benefit children's learning, they need to show enthusiasm, enjoy what they are doing and be present to experience with children.

Children's response to what is being taught and learned encourages Diana to be enthusiastic of the work she offers and work in ways that she finds enjoyable. She is aware that her attitude towards what she teaches influences her students' views and attitudes to learning and her co-workers' cooperation.

The main factor that influences how Viktoria works is her interest in working with children. To be able to work in a preschool, she believes one has to be present, show interest, give children time and a peaceful environment to work in. She feels that open materials and time are factors that encourage children to be creative and work independently. Viktoria enjoys working with children as they are so creative and imaginative. She is aware that all children need to be creative is freedom to think about what they are doing, come with ideas and follow them through into their work.

It is enjoyable as you do not see the end result. You hand the child materials and you think that you know what they will do, and then they do something completely different. You can offer them more materials, or they ask for something else and all of a sudden the outcome is so much more than I thought it would be. My experience of children's art is very enjoyable and something that I feel I benefit a lot from, because they are incredible, they are so imaginative. I feel that I experience so much through them, including their joy.

Viktoria believes that it is important to listen intently to what children have to say as "they are more open to new and imaginative ideas". She feels

that her main role as an educator is to offer total freedom and the materials they need to follow through and work on their ideas.

Learning should be “all about having fun” and “one should be able to have fun, let go, play, find the child inside and enjoy being creative”. With this in mind Gabriella believes it is up to her to be a good role model who sets positive examples. By offering a positive environment she feels that children are more likely to relax and enjoy what they are doing. Gabriella is convinced that her past experiences have influenced how she teaches today.

It is about how I was brought up, how I was encouraged and supported to be creative by those around me. I think that it fuelled my interest. I felt good and enjoyed it so much that I think that it is important that children get to experience the same as I did. ...children come from different backgrounds, some with difficulties, so this is a time that they can find happiness and forget and enjoy.

One of Bella’s attempts to influence and create opportunities for her staff to work more creatively was to hire an artist. It soon became evident that it had a positive effect on the creativity and visual art practices in her preschool. When the artist worked on projects, there was a lot of life and general happiness in the school which encouraged staff to try new ways of working. She was also aware of how interested and willing the children were to work and how curious and supportive the parents were in what was being done.

In Ashley’s opinion, children’s art is not complicated, and therefore anyone who is confident in working with children can teach it. Even though she feels confident and enjoys making art with children, she acknowledges that it takes a lot of patience and that she would benefit from going on courses to learn what children learn from their art practices. She feels that her only role in teaching children art is to show them how to use art materials and tools, encouraging them to work independently and follow instructions.

Participants who have worked with an individual who has oversight with art and creative practices in their preschools all agreed that the quality of work increased, there was more variety of materials and art projects and staff were influenced to try new ways of working.

4.2.1.1 On reflection

The findings indicate that there are inner and external influences affecting how educators perform. The inner influences are personal, relating to

individuals' education, attitudes, peace of mind and personal work practices. The external influences are the working conditions and environmental experiences dealing with courses and training made available, availability of materials, interaction with children and co-workers and daily routine.

4.2.2 Creative mentor

With many years' experience and knowledge of creative practices, Diana feels that it is a "tragedy" that there is still not an acknowledged position in preschools for individuals with education in some kind of creative art studies, who inspires and has an overview of how art is being conducted.

Of course there should be a position like this within all preschools. Without a doubt I believe that it would be of benefit to have a position for people with good education, experience and interest in what they are doing. It would be in the best interest for all schools. I will not back down on that, I am rather disappointed that it has not been put into practice yet.

In an ideal situation, Viktoria believes that a professional working as a creative mentor would be beneficial to staff and children, but in reality she is aware that preschools need first and foremost educated preschool teachers. Until that changes she expects that things will be the same and "everyone just has to do the best they can with what they have, and figure out how to work themselves".

Even though art and creativity are emphasised in Gabriella's workplace, the quality has varied between years. She explained that during the time that an artist worked in the preschool she was aware of how differently the children worked. The artist offered children a broader variety of materials and projects and was willing to experiment and try new things with them. The work done was both inspiring to staff and children and visible throughout the school. Gabriella noticed that the artist worked enthusiastically, was inspiring and a positive role model, unlike staff who are expected to work in this way without having the knowledge and interest. Gabriella is convinced that preschools could benefit from having an individual with knowledge and experience in this position.

Like Gabriella, Bella has experience of working with an artist who had oversight of children's art and creative work. It was decided that the best way for the artist to work would be to work with groups of children. It was during that period that Bella become aware of how prominent the children's art was

in the preschool. Children got to use their own ideas and work independently at their own pace with regard to their individual abilities and interests. Once the artist left the preschool, Bella was disappointed to see how quickly children started to produce similar work, just as they had done previously, even though they had all learned so much from her during her stay.

Even though most preschool teachers manage well with art practices, Bella believes it “would be a dream and rewarding for our school to employ an individual who showed interest, had oversight and took care of the school’s art and creativity”. Bella is of the opinion that not enough emphasis is placed on art and creativity in preschool teacher’s studies, leaving preschool teachers not fully aware and capable of how best to work in this area. She also feels that one solution could be to hire a preschool teacher who has specialised in art or an artist who works on a temporary basis, as their interest and knowledge in what they do is beneficial to all.

4.2.2.1 On reflection

The role of the creative mentor has been described as an individual who encourages and supports staff in working creatively, as well as influencing them by being a positive role model. Their education and interest in creativity and visual art practices, has been shown to inspire and encourage staff to work in ways that are beneficial to children’s education.

4.2.3 Education and inspiration

Bella feels that preschool teachers were more likely to listen to children’s ideas and include them in art projects, whereas other educators seemed more insecure and needed guidance on how to work. Even though Viktoria’s studies introduced her to the value of art in children’s education, she feels that she only truly learned and understood its value once she took part, relaxed and trusted that children could be creative.

The school office in the town in which Diana works offers courses to preschool educators, but very little is offered in the form of visual art. That she found disappointing, especially considering how much time is given to art-related subjects. Bella has found that most of the courses that are available to her staff through the town office deal with remedial teaching and very few relate to art of any kind. A problem that Bella and Rebekka have faced is that courses that are made available do not always support the goals and aims that their schools aim to work towards.

Without a doubt in her mind, Rebekka believes that continuous learning is the key element for preschool educators, but that it was most effective

when it was devoted to supporting and educating staff in the workplace, as part of on-the-job training.

A project manager is able to support educators in creative work with children and make them aware of the possibilities. It is most effective and provides educator satisfaction. I have very good experience with working with a project manager who encouraged creativity in visual art, who made work more visible and in doing so increased the students', educators' and parents' respect and awareness regarding creative work.

Working with children is inspirational according to Gabriella, Isabella and Ashley, but they feel that they often need ideas for projects. They find ideas on craft pages on the internet and in books and ask or copy their colleagues' ideas and projects. In her experience of being in nature and going on field trips, Gabriella has found inspiration for many projects with children. Isabella and Gabriella find it rewarding to watch children playing and listen to what they say, as they feel that children's ideas and interests are ideal for projects. Even though Ashley has a short working experience and enjoys what she is doing, she feels that she often works on projects with children without understanding what they are learning. For that reason she believes that by understanding how and what children learn she would learn how best to work with children.

4.2.3.1 On reflection

The findings strongly indicate preschool educators' need for education in art and creative practices on all levels. Continuous learning and on-the-job training was found to be vital in keeping educators focused and active in their work. This was suggested to be especially useful to those who have no experience, who need confidence in what they are doing and security, to know that they are doing it correctly. The need not only for ideas and inspiration for projects, but an understanding and knowledge of how learning and teaching through visual art benefits children's education was evident.

5 Discussion

Key words that stand out in this research are attitude, priority, opportunity, knowledge and understanding. These five nouns are elements that indicate that the choice of environments influences how teachers teach and how children learn. They also influence how schools choose their policies and especially how visual art is practiced in preschools.

This paper has studied eight preschool educators' past experiences and present practices of visual art and creativity. The goal of this research was to investigate and look for answers to how preschool educators view, experience and value visual art in preschools. I wanted to find out if and how they may affect the way they offer preschool children opportunities for working in visual art. The research question was: How is preschool visual art education valued, experienced and viewed?

The participants were enthusiastic to recall their childhood experiences in art making and most explained with emotion and in detail how they felt and what they did. There seemed to be a strong connection between how they experienced art as children and how they value and practice art today in their workplaces. This is in accordance with Ginsberg, Mast, and Snow (2010), who discussed how teachers are influenced by their own experiences in school and teach as they were taught, creating a cycle of teaching.

There are three subchapters; the first discusses how experiences not only influence children in the present moment but throughout their lives. The second subchapter discusses what children learn through visual art and the third how visual art is being practiced.

5.1 First creative experiences

The participants were able to recall and explain in vivid detail their first experiences of making art. There are strong correlations between their first art experiences with unrestricted play outdoors using natural materials. Another common factor was their personal need to create freely in unrestricted environments, where their imaginations and problem-solving skills were able to develop naturally. These experiences are seen in Write's (2010) discussion of how children are drawn to environments that offer freedom to work on ideas and experiment with materials without adult

interference, where they stimulate their imagination and expand their visual communication skills with both peers and adults.

A common factor among all participants is their need to create, and even when they were not offered opportunities for free creative expression in school, they found ways to be creative through play, both indoors and outdoors. All but one of the participants mentioned emotions of joy and happiness when playing and creating freely in nature, undisturbed by adult interruption. This corresponds with Robinson (2011) and Fowler (1996) who discuss creativity as a natural process of finding solutions to problems that we are faced with, where new experiences are created and re-created through first hand interactions with others and encounters in the environment (Dewey, 1938/1997).

Similarities are seen among participants who have the need to make art and work creatively today. They all had positive role models as children, whether they were their educators or influential family members. These positive role models were described as individuals who showed interest, gave opportunities and freedom to work on self-inspired ideas. They were also described as being supportive, and who gave encouragement by complimenting and discussing what was being done. Write (2010) believes that the quality of education that is acquired through creative expression in visual arts depends on the opportunities, values and attitudes of those who offer them. Significant people, such as teachers and parents, either support or obstruct participation in visual arts due to how they value and understand what it has to offer children's creative, cognitive and social development (Write, 2010).

Participants all expressed the need and enjoyment of being creative as children, and that when they were not given opportunities to be creative, they found ways to express themselves through creative free play outdoors or through art projects at home. Lowenfeld & Brittain (1982) reminds us that most of adults' pleasant childhood memories are not to do with school, but rather connected to situation that take place elsewhere. Learning that promotes intense experiences, similar to those had in childhood, should be exciting, stimulating and drive children to use their knowledge and skill in meaningful ways that help them develop and grow (Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1982).

Most of the participants recalled drawing or art teachers who showed no interest or enthusiasm in what they taught and whose teaching methods limited creativity. One participant mentioned feelings of insecurity and incompetence as she was never complimented and always rushed. This

resulted in her feeling unhappy and inadequate during these classes. The teacher's role is not merely to communicate knowledge to their students, but to encourage them to gain understanding, knowledge and skills that are beneficial to cultivating an interest and joy in working and thinking creatively (The Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Preschools, 2011).

Participants recalled their visual art experiences through their emotional experiences, by this I mean their reference to how they felt during their art-making practices. The findings suggest that participants' experiences and willingness to learn were influenced by how their teachers taught. It shows how educators' interest and positive attitudes towards teaching art encouraged positive experiences, whereas educators who showed little enthusiasm or interest discouraged learning in this area. These experiences, positive or negative, were shown to have carried over into their personal lives, reflecting in how they view, value and practice visual art. Participants recalled enjoyment from working independently and mentioned that they were focused, made decisions and learned to work with others. This finding resembles Damasio (1994), who has shown how emotions affect individuals' thinking, communication and decision-making skills as well as their behaviour. Positive emotional experiences are important, as they influence and reflect the way learning takes place, how individuals interact with their environment and others, both in and out of school situations.

By evaluating the findings of this research and looking at related theory, it seems rational to conclude that the practice of visual arts should be beneficial to children's learning as it is directly related to their self-expression and the arousal of their emotions. These processes in turn interact and stimulate children's attention, memory, decision and social skills which are essential and necessary attributes for children to learn.

5.2 What children learn by art making

In the Icelandic Curriculum Guide for Preschools (2011), creativity is mentioned as one of the essential pillars of education and that it enhances reflection, personal education and initiative. By promoting children's creative working processes, their imagination, emotions, new thought processes and willingness to learn are stimulated. School curricula should be well-planned, with values that encourage children's critical thinking, promote their problem-solving skills and encourage them to think creatively and independently, instead of encouraging children to conform to teachers' pre-determined ideas (Egan, 1992).

At first it seemed as though participants were not confident in naming what children learned by art making. Nonetheless when the data was collectively categorized three related groups were visible. They are: academic skills, self-awareness and well-being. After further reflection I noticed connections to the mind, body and soul, which connect to areas in the other groups during the learning process. These findings correspond to Egan's (1992) reference to children, who in the act of drawing, learn by the full emergence of their body, thoughts and emotions. When children's personal experience of art making co-exists with other areas of learning, children's cognitive and social development are enhanced (Write, 2010) and those who are especially interested and motivated in art practices have improved attention and cognitive development (Posner, Rothbart, Sheese & Kieras, 2008).

Rebekka believes that children who are able to work and create independently in areas that they are strong and talented in will develop into talented, competent and knowledgeable individuals. For that reason she believes that the avenues for creativity should be left open. According to Fowler (1996), children should be in the center of their art-making process, where their learning is more than technique and skill, rather where learning takes place through curiosity and exploration, building on previous knowledge to find new ways of interpretation and expression. The multiple intelligences theory explains interdisciplinary learning as complex thought and learning processes that take place where previous knowledge gained in one area can be used to support other areas of knowledge (Gardner, 1993). Creativity could be stimulated and nurtured through visual art practices that incorporate interdisciplinary learning. For this to be successful a close working relationship between educators and children needs to be in place so that they can share their knowledge, skills and interest (Panagioti & Berki, 2014).

Even though it became evident in the findings that visual art practices are beneficial to children's education, no mention was made of how learning processes were made visible. For those who are not interested or knowledgeable in pedagogy, visual art practices may look like it is purely done for enjoyment and therefore it may never be taken seriously in children's education (Fowler, 1998). Both Harðardóttir (2001) and Wright (2010) suggest that by documenting body language, facial expression and gestures are given a deeper meaning, and knowledge of what children are learning and doing in the classroom are made visible. By documentation, children's abilities in complex communication and creative thought processes can be captured in their play and drawings, which help others

understand what children are learning (Write, 2010). It is important for educators to communicate to others that they believe and enjoy teaching art so that they may inspire others to do the same. By making learning visible, educators promote a deeper understanding and awareness of the benefits of visual art practice (Fowler, 1996).

Surprisingly, no reference was made to children's sensory exploration of materials, especially as children are very competent at learning through sensory stimulation. Various materials stimulate the senses, which in turn develop higher brain function (Lewin-Benham, 2010). These functions are not only connected to the sense of touch, but rather to complex functions that control language, movement, critical thinking and attention, and become learning through the development of the body, thoughts and emotions (Egan, 1992).

5.2.1 Well-being and emotions

According to the Icelandic Curriculum Guide for Preschools (2011), schools have to create and support a positive, healthy environment that promotes children's positive self-image and mental well-being, develop their communication skills and nurture an understanding of one's own as well as others' feelings. A common factor in this research was how participants experienced positive emotions of joy, happiness, fun and freedom when being able to work freely on art projects as children. Today they enjoy watching children interact with materials and are proud of their creative abilities and achievements. Mutual positive emotions were experienced by participants who worked creatively, both independently or in cooperation with others in planning, brainstorming, researching and solving problems. Csikszentmihalyi (2002) calls the emotionally pleasurable state of joy and happiness that individuals experience when totally involved in a creative process "flow". When art has no predetermined outcome and allows for children to express their feelings, ideas and experiences within a state of flow, their self-image and abilities are enhanced, which leads to positive emotions and mental health (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). Immordino-Yang and Damasio (2011) describe human beings as emotional and social beings with feelings and emotions, which are said to be as basic as sleeping and eating. Often in education, cognition and decision-making skills are seen as separate from emotion, and disconnected from each other. There is a strong connection between how learning, emotion and the body connects through emotion and previous knowledge that can be used in real-life situations (Immordino-Yang and Damasio, 2011).

The findings indicated that children were more focused, happier and enthusiastic to learn when projects were built on their own ideas and interests. Creativity and joy are common factors in children's play and visual art. Write (2010) discusses that when children work freely using their imagination and ideas, they are able to connect and express themselves in personal ways that make them feel good. It is during this time that their self-image is strengthened and faith in their abilities and competence increases (Write, 2010). It is vital that children have a healthy self-image, are confident and experience a sense of well-being, as Schirrmacher (1998) suggests that children who have a negative self-image find it generally more difficult to learn.

Participants' strong connection to emotions was most unexpected, but has shown what an important part it plays in learning. Emotions affect reasoning and learning and when emotionally-aroused experiences take place they are more easily remembered than those that are more neutral in nature. It is during these times of emotional arousal that one's attention is most active and benefits the learning taking place (Hardiman, Rinne, Gregory & Yarmolinskaya, 2011). Olenchack and Gaa (2010) explain affective development as an individual's emotional ability to recognise experience and express a wide range of emotions as well as having the ability to respond to others' emotions. Cognitive development is influenced by an individual's affective development, which is activated by emotional stimuli in their environment.

The results suggest that visual art practices promote positive experiences and a sense of well-being when children are encouraged to work independently. It is in these situations that thinking, problem-solving and decision-making skills are enhanced (Damasio, 1994; Dewey, 1958).

5.2.2 Teachers' self-awareness

The findings suggest that art-making experiences in childhood influence and shape attitudes relating to personal competences and confidence, while art is practiced according to how it is valued. Through reflection educators may be able to make connections between their own experiences and be more aware of how they teach. When teachers examine their beliefs, personal experiences and attitudes, they are able to see what they value, where their interests lie and how they are best able to teach (McDermott, 2013). Efficient teachers are those who are able to recall and reflect on how they have interacted and worked with children in the past and decide how they want to do so in the future (McDermott, 2013).

All of the participants recalled their art teachers' attitudes, teaching methods and how they felt in their classes. The findings suggest that educators who evoked positive experiences and emotions encouraged their students to learn and feel secure in what they were doing. None of the participants mentioned how their attitudes and practices could be affecting their students' experiences. Educators should be knowledgeable and professional in the field of pedagogy and reflect on their practices to be conscious of how they teach, as self-awareness is an essential part of being a good role model (McDermott, 2013).

Influencing factors that participants believe affect the way they teach have been categorised into two groups, and can be seen in Table 1. The factors that educators have control over I call inner influences, while influences that educators have little or no control over I call external influences. The inner influences were: educator's education, their attitudes and enthusiasm towards how they work, their previous experiences and their ability to be present and work with children to support their learning. The external influences are continuous learning and training provided by preschools, the availability and choice of materials, the daily routine and school policies. Educators are able to grow professionally when they reflect with the intent to find their strengths and where they need improving, so that they can plan how best to work in the future. Olenchack and Gaa (2010) believe that if teachers are not able to meet their own personal needs, know their limitations or capabilities, as well as those of their students, their students' educational needs will not be met effectively.

In conclusion it seems plausible to suggest that for educators to be successful they need to be fully aware of how their attitudes and actions influence and affect children's learning, and how by reflection they are able to find ways to interact with children that encourage positive learning experiences.

5.3 How visual art is practiced in preschools

Early experiences influence teachers' attitudes towards how visual art is practiced. Gabriella believes that her enthusiasm and interest to work creatively is directly due to her creative childhood. She believes that teachers should reflect on how they teach and have fun and be creative with children as it sets a positive example. Bella on the other hand never thought of herself as being capable at art making but enjoyed taking part. Today she is a preschool manager who has learned the benefits of practicing visual art. She remembers the enjoyment it gave her, and encourages her staff to offer

children opportunities that support their independence and inspire their creativity. It is the educator's role to support and enable learning in positive learning environments that benefit learning later on in life (Dewey, 1938/1997; Dewey, 2000; Eisner, 2002). So when art is used to connect to children on common ground, pathways are opened for learning to take place through trust, discussion and sharing of ideas. For this to be successful it is important that teachers themselves recall their own childhood experiences, so they can better understand how best to create opportunities for positive experiences to take place through their teaching practices (Korn-Bursztyn, 2012).

It seems that most of the participants find inspiration for art projects from books, the internet or from their co-workers. Even though children's ideas were often mentioned as inspiration for projects, participants often chose predetermined activities that emphasised production and entertainment over the process of exploration and experience. Malaguzzi (1998) explains creativity as a natural process that takes place in everyday life where children do not automatically learn what teachers teach. He rather explains how learning takes place when previous knowledge meets new experiences from the environment and resources that are made available. Children's education should be meaningful, and not consist purely of acquiring academic knowledge and skills that reflect educators' knowledge, skills and ideas (Dewey, 1938/1997; Edwards, Foreman & Gandini, 1993). Participants believe that attitudes play a major role in how visual art is practiced. Educators, who are interested, partake in and are flexible in their teaching methods, create environments that are more likely to create emotionally meaningful experiences that increase their students' attention and their willingness to learn (Korn-Bursztyn, 2012). Even though educators cannot force experiences on children, they do however influence their experiences through their social interaction and the environment they create for learning to take place (Cuffaro, 1995).

Most of the participants believed they tried to pay attention to children's ideas and interests when organizing projects but often feel hindered by their own lack of inspiration, insufficient time, space and materials. Eisner (2002) described competent teachers as those who are supportive, give time for exploration and know when to back off and allow children to work independently. The National Curriculum Guide for Preschools (2011) also emphasizes that preschools should make opportunities available and support pupils in working with a variety of materials and equipment so that children can learn independently on their own terms.

In conclusion it seems logical to suggest that educators know the importance of visual art practices, but often decide in favour of predetermined craft-based projects. The problem with this is that when educators themselves choose this option, children do not fully benefit from its practices and society misunderstands its value in children's education. Educators in the world-renowned Reggio Emilia schools encourage and acknowledge children's learning through exploration and firsthand experiences. They work and learn alongside their children, encouraging them to repeat activities to deepen their understanding and solve problem through the use of various forms of expression. Children in these schools are given opportunities for discussion and use their ideas for projects that help to stimulate their thought processes, imagination and creativity, instead of conforming and minimizing children's creative and sensory experiences (Edwards et al., 1993).

The findings indicate that there are differences of opinion among participants' perception of art and creative practices in their workplaces. Participants in managerial positions, who have an overview of how their staff work, feel that many of their educators could be more creative, show more interest and enthusiasm in what is being done. Participants who work with children daily believe that they manage very well, but felt the need for courses or workshops related to visual art practices. I wonder whether that has to do with the fact that the educator's role is too vague (Einarsdóttir, Jónsdóttir & Garðarsdóttir, 2013).

5.3.1 Educators' attitudes toward creative mentors

The majority of participants are of the same opinion when discussing their experiences of working with a creative mentor. They found that these individuals had a better understanding and knowledge of visual art practices; they showed more interest and enthusiasm and therefore inspired others to work more creatively. All of the educated teachers agreed that creative mentors should be preschool teachers, as they need an understanding of pedagogy, but that they needed to be knowledgeable and skillful in visual art practices. They believed that the combination of the two benefited children and staff the most, as they were able to advise on art practices that support and meet children's individual development needs. These findings are similar to those of McArdle (2002), who believes that a good balance between educators' knowledge of theory and practice, as well as having studied pedagogy, are important to raise awareness of how and what to teach so that it benefits the child's learning and their experiences.

Those who have the most experience of working with a creative mentor mentioned these individuals. They played an important role within their schools by inspiring, supporting, encouraging and advising educators in working creatively. Participants felt that the on-the-job training of this sort was especially productive and useful to both staff and children. The work practices and education of an *atelierista* mentioned in Gandini et al. (2005) are not the same as these creative mentors who are mentioned in this thesis, but their role is similar in that they support, advise and encourage educators to work creatively with children.

Educators who felt that they needed assistance with their visual art practices mentioned that they often looked for support from their creative mentor who helped them develop professionally and become more confident in what they were doing. They mentioned that it was good to turn to someone for help when they needed help. Successful learning programs, according to Mörk (2009), consist of co-workers sharing experience, knowledge and working towards mutual goals. This act of assisting others while they gain knowledge and confidence before moving away and leaving them to work individually is called scaffolding (Wood, Bruner and Ross, 1976).

The managers found creative mentors to be positive role models, as the quality of creative work increased when they were present and practicing in their schools. One of the participants feels it would be a perfect scenario to have creative mentors in all schools, but that first and foremost preschools needed educated preschool teachers. Bandura's (1971) social learning theory discusses how individuals learn through their environment by watching and observing how others work and behave. It is through this process that individuals learn how to act and work.

One of the participants has specialised in creative studies and has many years of experience of using art to encourage creativity. She feels very strongly that her education is not fully acknowledged by her superiors, as her position does not have a title to show for it. She also felt disappointed that she sometimes has to lower her quality of work and personal expectations due to co-workers' lack of knowledge and understanding. This reflects Jónsdóttir's (2012) conclusion that individuals who have finished their studies experience themselves as professionals and expect a job title. Teachers, however, who do not feel supported, acknowledged, encouraged or challenged professionally are at high risk of underachieving and quitting their jobs (Gaa & Olenchak, 2010; Ingersoll & Smith, 2004). The same goes for teachers who have to follow pre-determined routines who never get to

use their creative abilities or critical thinking skills, and often become bored, lose interest and their belief in how they work (Gaa & Olenchak, 2010). I feel that this is a factor that is seldom discussed, but one that should be addressed.

Creative mentors were mentioned as leaders who encourage and inspire others to work with materials in new and exciting ways. These mentors were said to offer a wider variety of materials, offer projects that children would otherwise not have the opportunity to experience and were more flexible in finding new ways of working. Valsdóttir (2009) describes leaders as those who inspire others to learn, believe in the value of art education, have knowledge in theory and practice as well as a good imagination and creative skills. The findings indicated a noticeable difference between how an artist and a preschool teacher with specialization in arts and creativity worked. The artist was said to be efficient in teaching technique and willing to use new techniques, but lacked the knowledge and experience of how children develop and learn, whereas the preschool teacher understood how children develop, learn and interact, as well as knowledge of age-appropriate projects and materials. This reflects Korn-Bursztyn's (2012) belief that cooperation between a preschool teacher and an artist can be beneficial for teachers to learn the difference between predetermined, adult-directed and child-directed projects, and for artist to learn how to work on age-appropriate projects that benefit children's development.

5.3.2 Dilemmas that hamper the teaching of visual art

There seem to be various factors hindering visual art being practiced objectively. Participants feel that educators lack or have limited experience of preschool practices and knowledge of how to work creatively in visual art. It also showed that educators often feel insecure and rely on adult-orientated, predetermined projects that are found on the internet and in books. Write (2010) explains that the problem with children taking part in teacher-orientated, predetermined projects is that they learn to follow orders and their teacher's path of knowledge instead of developing their own meanings and understanding of what is being done. The findings suggested that educators often support and inspire each other, but there was a need for a better understanding of what children learn through art practices. I am aware that educators often rely on craft-based projects that offer directions on how to execute projects step by step, giving them a sense of security. In my experience, predetermined crafts not only inhibit children's creativity but their educators' as well.

All participants believe that visual art is necessary, but mentioned that they or their colleagues sometimes felt hesitant, insecure and unprepared in engaging in art activities. Korn-Bursztyn (2012) observed that preschool managers may have studied in leadership programs but often have little or limited knowledge of how best to practice visual art that would enable them to encourage and sufficiently support their staff in this area.

Managers mentioned that it was difficult to encourage educators who were insecure, lacking interest and motivation. They found this to be problematic as their attitudes not only affected the quality of work with children but had a negative effect on other staff. As educators are children's role models who influence children's experiences and how they learn by how they speak and act (Dewey, 1938/1997), they need to be fully aware of these facts and work objectively in the best interest of children.

Even though the preschool managers showed that they are supportive of visual art being practiced and are aware of its value in children's education, they usually are not the ones who work with implementing it. Their knowledge and understanding of the subject and what it has to offer children's education plays a major role in how art is practiced in their schools, and what they expect from their educators. Kron-Bursztyn (2012) says that preschool managers can benefit from taking part in discussions on preschool art with other preschool leaders, as well as attend seminars and courses on children's art. The UNESCO report, *Vegavísir fyrir listfræðslu* (2006) emphasizes that for quality arts education to take place all teachers and principals should have good knowledge about art practice and an understanding of the value art has to offer education. It also states the importance of art teachers, teachers and principals collaborating, sharing ideas and experiences and supporting each other in ways that support arts education.

The findings showed that managers often deal with educators' contrasting views and working practices in art making, which leaves staff unified. These contrasts of opinion were shown to be mostly due to which materials should be available and how materials should be used when objectively supporting the school's goals and policies. For creativity to be more than inspiring words, Dewey (1938/1997; 2000) suggests that educators gain better understanding the curriculum so they may be confident and efficient in choosing how best to work. In the UNESCO report, *Vegavísir fyrir listfræðslu* (2006) it indicated that teachers and principals who have knowledge and an understanding of art and who share the same views and values towards art education are more able and likely to work together,

share their experiences and support each other in offering quality art education. Action research methods can be helpful for supporting staff groups with diverse backgrounds, as it centres on individual abilities and how teaching and learning takes place. This method not only examines and challenges individual educators, but strengthens the school community when educators get to share and reflect on their learning experiences. Action research methods used by Mörk (2009) showed that preschool educators developed professionally by reflecting on how they taught. She found that her school community was strengthened through a shared mutual vision, with emphasis placed on discussion, teamwork and being responsible within the group.

The findings suggest that managers find it challenging to find courses that are suitable and benefit all staff, as they have different needs due to their education and working experience. Participants found that their municipalities rarely offered courses relating to arts and creativity. Fowler (1996) believes that quality education depends on the quality of teaching. He graphically describes teachers as being the engines of their schools, and whose knowledge, understanding and skill drives, encourages and influences children to want to learn. The Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Preschools (2011) mentions that interested and well-educated teachers are the key to quality education and a successful school system. As creativity is mentioned as a requirement, teachers' knowledge and understanding of creativity should be encouraged by planning and initiating opportunity for learning. Preschool principals are responsible for offering their staff opportunities to better their knowledge and develop themselves as educators (National Curriculum Guide for Preschools, 2011).

Even though there is awareness of the benefits of continuous learning on professional development, the findings indicated that there is no time to implement it objectively during working hours. Due to high staff turnover, continuous learning was said to be very tedious. Fowler (1996) found that the most efficient way to improve teachers' practice is through in-service education, as it helps educators to transfer what they learn into other areas of teaching. Ingersoll and Smith (2004) indicate that educators who work with mentors are encouraged to work and less likely to leave their workplaces within the first year.

Rebekka believes that there is a better connection and understanding to what is being done when it is done in practice. She has found that when staff have attended courses they often found it difficult to incorporate it into their own practices. Workshops that occur only once often deal with subjects out

of the context of what is actually practiced or reflect teachers' needs, therefore seldom promote teachers' learning. In contrast, successful learning takes place over time and is similar to that which will be later used in practice (Bransford, Brown, Cocking, Donovan & Pellegrino, 2000, pp. 190–205). A problem Fowler (1996) finds with a single teacher taking part in a continuous learning program is that it is often very difficult for them to implement new information and make changes within a large staff body. For new information to be successfully relayed to other educators, support and encouragement from peers and management is vital (Fowler, 1996).

All participants agreed that both they and their co-workers would benefit from continuous learning of some kind, to support them in their teaching of visual art and the use of materials. They felt that insecurities that arise were often due to the lack of skills and understanding of how to use art material and tools. Caffaro (1997, p. 37) believes that if materials are chosen due to their value and seen as “the text of early childhood classrooms” they are more likely to be used and made available in children’s environments. It is the educators’ understanding of these materials, she says, that decide the quality of the learning opportunities that children are offered. Those participants in managerial positions agreed that the children would benefit from educators who not only enjoy offering and working on visual art projects, but from those who felt confident and competent in working in this area.

Some of the participants mentioned that not enough time is given to art-related subjects, and one preschool teacher found that she learns more personally through her own endeavors than through her studies. Bamford (2009) and Karlson (2011) both mention that teachers felt that not enough time was given to art-related subjects in their studies, and Fowler (1996) explains that most often teachers’ insecurities arise when they have to teach something that they have no knowledge or understanding of doing. This often leads to educators feeling uncomfortable, insecure and incompetent in what they are practicing and would therefore rather avoid those practices (Fowler, 1996).

The findings of this research indicate that educator’s attitudes are rooted in their experiences and learning and influence how they teach. Gaa and Olenchack (2011) described how educators often teach in ways that they were taught. This should indicate to educators to pay attention and reflect on their actions and how they teach, as their attitudes not only affect children’s present experiences but could affect learning throughout their lives. In my experience, most educators are willing to work in ways that are

required, but some do not have the tools or knowledge of how to work spontaneously or objectively. I feel this is mostly because educators who have no experience of working with children do not get the training they should once they start working.

5.3.3 On reflection

After reflecting on the findings and theory I did not expect to find how much of an impact educators' or other strong role models' actions influence others' experiences, not only in the present but long into the future.

Table 2 is a collection of findings, showing how participants experienced their childhood educator's actions. The column on the left indicates educators' actions and the one on the right indicates participants' experiences.

Table 2: Educators' actions and participants' experiences

Educators' positive actions	Participants' positive experiences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relaxed • Approachable • Flexible teaching method • Interested in what they teach • Supportive of students' ideas and interests • Encourage their students • Offer exciting projects • Inspire students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relaxed • Enjoyed working and learning • Joy, happiness and general well-being • Enjoyment of working on projects relating to their interests and ideas • Sense of accomplishment • Felt encouraged and wanted to learn • Willing to take part
Educators' negative actions	Participants' negative experiences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of interest in what is being taught • Rely on standardized projects • Uninterested in students' ideas • No enthusiasm • Lack of interest in teaching • Enforce conformity • Controlling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of interest • Rebellious • Felt as though they did not learn anything • Decrease in self-esteem • Feelings of incompetence due to not being able to meet teacher's expectations • Bored

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unrealistic expectations 	
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Table 2 clearly shows how educator’s actions and attitudes could impact children’s experiences, emotions and learning. In light of these findings and theory I feel it is imperative that educators reflect and discuss how they practice visual art, with the knowledge that educators often teach in ways that they were taught themselves.

Table 3 shows the collection of findings relating to what participants believe children learn and experience through the process of art making. They were placed into three categories and after further reflection I saw how they could be connected to the mind, body and soul. From this I conclude that learning does not take place in isolated areas but interacts and combines through various complex learning processes.

Table 3: What children learn and experience from their art making

Academic (Mind)	Self-awareness (Body)	Well-being (Soul)
Creative thinking	Self-perception	Happiness
Critical thinking	Self-expression	Joy
Problem solving skills	Self-control	Peace
Fine motor skills	Independence	Emotion
Concentration	Self-identity	
Experimentation		
Literacy		
Cooperation		
Communication skills		
Productivity		

The findings show that visual art practices vary depending on educators’ attitudes, education and interests. Managers felt that staff could generally work more creatively whereas other participants felt that they work as well as they can under the conditions and with their knowledge of visual art practices. The results also show that educators’ inner and external influences affect the way educators work. Inner influences are those which educators can personally control, whereas the external influences are decided by their workplace or curricula. The dilemmas that were shown to hamper visual art practices are focused on educators’ abilities, interest, attitudes and knowledge and the need for continuous learning that would benefit all staff

working in this area. The findings strongly indicate that creative mentors assist, support and encourage educators in their creative practices, thereby increasing the quality of work being done.

6 What the results suggest

The purpose of this research was to help me understand how educators experience and value visual arts education. Professionally I benefit by having better insight into how best to approach, encourage and assist educators in working creatively. With this research I hope to encourage educators to reflect and understand how they teach and what children learn through visual art. Hopefully this paper will also open discussion among educators concerning how to practice visual arts so that it benefits children's education.

The findings of this research are complex but suggest that there is a strong connection between participants' creative experiences as children and how they value and offer opportunities in visual art today. These views along with knowledge of theory and skill directly influence how educators practice visual art in preschools. Positive emotions that participants experienced through their creative experiences as children reinforced their need and willingness to offer children meaningful learning experiences in visual art. This information could help preschool educators become aware of how they offer children opportunities in visual art, with the knowledge that experiences may not only influence and impact the present, but future learning as well.

This research indicates that there is a need for preschool educators to take part in continuous learning. With high staff turnover and insufficient time for staff training, educators were often shown to lack the knowledge of how best to work with visual arts and the understanding of how it could benefit children's education. Preschool educators should be the point of focus in children's education, as there is no denying the fact that when opportunities for learning are made available, professional development increases and thus the quality of education. I suggest therefore that new creative ways of staff training and education should be examined, instead of continuously trying to encourage ways that are no longer effective. As preschools do not all emphasize the same theories and have different policies, there is a need for diversity in the courses and workshops that municipalities make available to preschool educators. Emphasis placed both on practice and theory would benefit educators' understanding of what lies behind what they are practicing. Educators' increased confidence and interest in what is being taught come with experience and knowledge, and

are attributes that are necessary when encouraging and influencing others to learn.

The differences between managers' and educators' views on visual arts practices suggest that there may be a lack of focus, compliance and understanding on how best to work to meet school policies. If managers need to constantly remind and encourage staff on how to work, and preschool educators feel they do the best they can with the situations and knowledge they have, I question what that "best" is. I urge managers to investigate where their focus lies, as when there are too many areas of focus the goals may become unclear to their staff.

In this research creative mentors were clearly shown as valuable additions to staff as they encouraged, assisted and inspired educators to work more creatively, thereby increasing the quality of visual art practices. Managers all saw the potential of having a creative mentor in their schools; as they offered staff support through continuous, in-house training. This kind of training means that staff do need to leave the workplace, and get to work on actual projects instead of listening to lectures that are often difficult to put into practice later. I urge that municipalities acknowledge this position and see the resources and potential they bring with them.

I was surprised to learn that educators were not confident and sometimes even vague in mentioning offhand how children benefit from practicing visual art. The results do show however that children benefit not only academically, but that their self-awareness is strengthened and their sense of well-being increased. In regard to this finding I believe there is a need for better understanding of the benefits of visual arts in preschool education and its value as a teaching tool. It is almost impossible for society to take preschool visual arts seriously if those who practice it are not confident themselves. Due to these findings, I question whether children are benefiting as well as they could be from their visual art practices, and encourage educators to be aware of their attitudes and practices.

The results of this research reflect and are based on eight individuals' experiences and attitudes towards visual art in preschool. The material however is so similar that even though it is inappropriate to generalise, I feel there is a strong possibility that others have the same experiences. Based on that assumption I feel that further research, with a larger sample, would be beneficial for finding out how best to implement changes that promote preschool educators' understanding and knowledge of how best to use visual arts in their practices.

Even though this paper is limited to visual art education, I believe that many of the aspects discussed in this paper are reflected in other areas of teaching and learning within preschool education. I therefore feel there is a great need for research in all areas of preschool practices in Iceland.

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Appendix 1: Letter to participants

Hafnarfjörður, febrúar 2014

Kæri viðtakandi

Ég heiti Michelle Sonia Horne og útskrifaðist sem leikskólakennari frá Háskólanum á Akureyri í júní 2006. Ég hef starfað við leikskólakennslu síðan ég útskrifaðist og unnið mikið við að byggja upp skapandi hugsun og tjáningu barna í gegnum listsköpun.

Ég ákvað að fara aftur í nám til að afla mér þekkingar og fá skilning á því hvað listsköpun getur gert fyrir menntun barna. Um þessar mundir er ég nemi við Kennaradeild Háskóla Íslands þar sem ég er í framhaldsnámi á sviði list- og verkmenntunar. Ég er að gera rannsókn í lokaverkefninu mínu og eru leiðbeinendur mínir Svanborg R Jónsdóttir lector og Hafdís Guðjónsdóttir prófessor á Menntavísindasviði. Með þessari rannsókn er ég að vinna meistaraþrófsverkefni mitt. Með þessari rannsókn er ég að vinna meistaraþrófsverkefni mitt. Rannsóknin mun leita svara við spurningunni: “Hver eru sýn, gildi og upplifun leikskólastarfsfólks á listsköpun barna?”

Við undirbúning rannsóknarinnar mun ég taka viðtöl við starfsfólk leikskóla á Stór-Reykjavíkursvæðinu þar sem ég leitast eftir að fá fram upplýsingar um hvernig starfsfólk vinnur að listsköpun og viðhorf þess til listsköpunar.

Þú hefur fullkomist frelsi til að tjá þig og þú getur hætt þátttöku hvenær sem er án nokkurra persónulegra afleiðinga. Fyllsta öryggis verður gætt í meðferð þeirra upplýsinga sem viðtölin gefa. Nöfn þátttakenda verða ekki notuð og þess gætt að ekki sé hægt að rekja upplýsingar til þeirra. Ég er bundin þagnareiði um það sem fram kemur.

Með þessu bréfi óska ég eftir þátttöku þinni í rannsókn minni. Ég verð í sambandi við þig fljótlega til að kanna hvort þú vilt taka þátt og í framhaldi af því að skipuleggja þá stað og tíma fyrir viðtalið.

Með kærri kveðju,

Michelle Sonia Horne

msh4@hi.is

simi: 6950954

Appendix 2: Letter to participants: Acceptance of participation

Hafnarfjörður, febrúar 2014

Upplýst samþykki fyrir þátttöku í rannsókn Michelle Sonia Horne um sýn, gildi og upplifun leikskólastarfsfólks á listsköpun barna.

Titill rannsóknar: Dialogues on preschool visual art education. How is preschool visual art education valued, experienced and viewed?

Ég undirrituð/aður samþykki og staðfesti vilja minn til þátttöku í rannsókn Michelle Sonia Horne um sýn, gildi og upplifun leikskólastarfsfólks á listsköpun barna.

Með undirskrift minni hér að neðan staðfestist að ég hef lesið kynningarbréfið og er meðvituð/aður um að ég hef fullkomið frelsi til að tjá mig, get hætt þátttöku hvenær sem er og að þagnareiður gildir um þær upplýsingar sem ég gef.

Undirskrift

Dagsetning

Appendix 3: List of questions

To preschool educators:

Segðu mér frá bakgrunni þínum, menntun og eða reynslu þinni.

Hverjar eru fyrstu minningar þínar frá listsköpun?

Hvernig er unnið með listsköpun í leikskólanum og hvert er þitt hlutverk?

Hvað hefur áhrif á það hvernig þú vinnur að listsköpun með börnunum?

Að þínu mati, hvað læra börn eða upplifa við listsköpun?

Hvaða skoðun hefur þú á því, hvernig verkefnin eru lögð fyrir börn?

To preschool managers:

Segðu mér frá bakgrunni þínum, menntun og eða reynslu þinni.

Hverjar eru fyrstu minningar þínar frá listsköpun?

Segir mér frá hvernig starfsfólk þitt vinnur með börnunum í verkefnum þeirra?

Hvað heldur þú að hafi áhrif á hvernig starfsfólk þitt vinnur?

Að þínu mati, hvað læra börn í gegnum listsköpun/með listsköpun?

Hvað finnst þér um það hvernig boðið upp er á listsköpun í leikskólanum?