



Transnational tomorrows today:

Graduate student futures
and imaginaries for art education

Guest Editors:
Anita Sinner, Kazuyo Nakamura
and Elly Yazdanpanah

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ABOUT THE e-JOURNAL

The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal promotes multi-disciplinary research in the Arts and Education and arose out of a recognised need for knowledge sharing in the field. The publication of diverse arts and cultural experiences within a multi-disciplinary context informs the development of future initiatives in this expanding field. There are many instances where the arts work successfully in collaboration with formerly non-traditional partners such as the sciences and health care, and this peer-reviewed journal aims to publish examples of excellence.

Valuable contributions from international researchers are providing evidence of the impact of the arts on individuals, groups and organisations across all sectors of society. The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is a clearing house of research which can be used to support advocacy processes; to improve practice; influence policy making, and benefit the integration of the arts in formal and non-formal educational systems across communities, regions and countries.

JAPAN

PROMOTING CHILDREN'S INTEREST IN ART APPRECIATION THROUGH PLAY ACTIVITIES

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ABSTRACT

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) comprise 17 goals, the fourth of which is related to ensuring equity and quality in education. In China's 'Course Standards', art education is presented as a required subject at the compulsory education stage. Art education in general should consider the needs of children of various ages and stages of personal development. Interest is the main force driving children to study art independently; thus, their interests should be satisfied in the art classroom to promote their becoming life-long learners of art. Fostering children's interests is critical to achieving the SDG objective of enabling all children to complete equitable and quality primary education with adequate and effective learning outcomes. This essay investigated the current status of Chinese elementary school students by reviewing research on children's interests and explored the potential of play activities to enhance children's interest in art appreciation based on Dewey's educational theory.

KEYWORDS

art education, interest, play, appreciation activities, elementary school, Chinese students

CURRENT ISSUES IN CHINESE ART EDUCATION

Elementary school art education in China aims to generate intrinsic learning interests in children through art activities. Children's interests are fostered through a comprehensive process that begins with the act of sensing, which, in turn, gives rise to memory and thought. Recent Chinese studies have shown that children's interest in elementary school art education tends to decline with age, and few children maintain persistent interest in it (Shujun & Hao 2021; Zizhen 2013). Meng (2016) surveyed 204 students in grades 2 and 4 and showed that as they progressed through these grades, they became less interested in drawing and handicrafts. Baoyuan (2016) conducted a questionnaire survey of 148 fifth and sixth graders, the results of which showed that more than 60 per cent of the children liked elementary school art education; both grades wanted to spend more time in elementary school art education classes, but the interest of the sixth graders was lower than that of the fifth graders. Lisha (2018) analysed the characteristics of the interest of children of each grade in elementary school art education; some children in fifth and sixth grades demonstrated their talent in art and systematically learned art as a special skill. However, as time passed, the children became more interested in other subjects rather than art and crafts. Although few studies have surveyed children's interest across all grades, the decline in interest in elementary school art education is more pronounced in fifth and sixth grades as children's grade level increases. The purpose of this study is to suggest an effective approach to art appreciation in fifth and sixth grades to increase children's interest through play activities based on a critical review of research on children's interests in China.

REVIEW OF RESEARCH ON CHILDREN'S INTERESTS IN ART EDUCATION IN CHINA

In recent years, art educators in China have begun conducting research on the development of children's interests. In this study, I review the research that focuses on the topics of teaching materials and teaching methods. For this review, I searched in National Knowledge Infrastructure

(CNIK¹) and the Chinese Dissertation Database (CDDB²) using two keywords: elementary school art education and student interest. I set the time range as from November 2011 to August 2021 and found approximately 100 sources of academic literature and research studies.

RESEARCH DIRECTION OF CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

Based on Maslow's hierarchy-of-needs theory, Meng (2016) explored the relationship between the needs of elementary school children and their interest in art activities, arguing that interest is one of the prerequisites for the attainment of self-actualization. Tong (2012) associated play with enjoyment and found that the enjoyment critical to the development of children's interests can be obtained through play. Baoyuan (2016) conducted a study to cultivate upper-grade students' interest and found that learning through ink painting was effective. The literature review revealed that research on teaching materials and methods aimed at increasing children's interest has been growing since the implementation of the 'Course Standard'. Moreover, this review indicated that there is a lack of evaluation methods for children's interest and a need for the cultivation of interest in art appreciation activities.

RESEARCH ON TEACHING MATERIALS

Research on effective teaching materials includes materials such as paper materials and mud plastic as well as picture books and picture diaries. The study of materials arouses children's active interest and stimulates their creativity through the unique tactile and color characteristics of materials (Haoguang 2017; Yuqi 2020). The selection of local folk art and art forms related to folk culture for research attracts children's interest in art activities while emphasizing the pride of the people and their love for folk crafts (Shujun & Hao 2021; Zizhen 2013). Research on teaching materials that is based on children's performance activities and aims to motivate children to experience

¹ CNIK: National Knowledge Infrastructure, <https://www.cnki.net>

² CDDB: China Dissertation Database, <https://www.wanfangdata.com.cn/index.html>

the fun of art activities tends to increase their interest in learning art. A review of research on teaching materials shows that appreciation activities are rarely addressed, and such activities are often utilized as introductory activities in classes or for reflection at the end of learning.

RESEARCH ON TEACHING METHODS

Research on teaching methods can be divided into two topics: teachers' teaching methods in general and incorporation of new technologies in teaching. Such research includes hierarchical methods and scenic methods. Hierarchical teaching methods are based on the children's own abilities, which can bring more joy and satisfaction in elementary art education classes and increase children's interest in learning art (Jing 2015). Scenic teaching methods allow students to construct a certain place or story, expand their imagination, and experience the joy of art activities. The use of new technology can improve teaching efficiency in regard to certain techniques, enrich teaching methods, make teaching more interesting, and arouse students' interest. Such technologies can also be used in appreciation activities; however, they lack a universal design and are not suitable for all appreciation activities, and it has been pointed out that senses developed through interacting with real objects are enhanced by appreciating the colors and tactile sensations in artwork (Yin 2014). In many studies, research on teaching materials and teaching methods has been conducted simultaneously. First, certain teaching materials are selected, and their characteristics are analysed for their merits in improving children's interest. Suitable teaching methods are then developed according to these characteristics. There is a great deal of research on activities pertaining to children's expression, while research on art appreciation activities is insufficient.

USE OF PLAY IN ART ACTIVITIES

Research exploring interest has tended to focus on art-making activities. An increasing number of studies on stimulating children's interest through art-making that utilize play-activity methods have been conducted.

Mengying (2017) proposed stimulating children's interest through play-based teaching methods. For example, children can be motivated to express themselves by putting on clothes they made in class. This type of activity often includes competitive play to stimulate children's interest. Tong's (2012) research indicated that for children to experience pleasure from learning, they first need to develop their interests. His questionnaire survey showed that 585 out of 600 children loved to play and enjoyed playing and that enjoyment became the power and purpose of play. By relating play and enjoyment, he argued that the enjoyment necessary for the development of children's interests can be obtained through play. He also argued that the inclusion of play in the content of art education allows children to express themselves in their own way. Teachers need to organize teaching in the form of play and to build an equal, free, open, and active teaching environment that is not confined within the four walls of the classroom; moreover, it is necessary to provide a more diverse teaching environment for students. Educational evaluation that pursues encouragement and openness tends to increase children's joy and strengthen the interaction between teachers and students. With its close focus on art-making activities, the research of Mengying (2017) and Tong (2012) did not mention art appreciation activities; rather, they discussed the possibility of increasing children's interest through playful art-making in elementary art education. Tong's (2012) research discussed the possibility of using play as the primary mode of elementary school art education; however, this idea was still in the conceptual stage and had been rarely applied in practice. Mengying's (2017) research used play as a classroom teaching method to create an enjoyable classroom atmosphere and increase children's joy. However, she did not conduct a survey to determine the effectiveness of her method; thus, her argument is not convincing as it is based only on her own observations during practice.

TOWARD A NEW APPROACH TO ART APPRECIATION BASED ON DEWEY'S CONCEPT OF PLAY

Dewey's (2003) theory of education demonstrates that children's interests are related to their growth. When learning activities match the direction of the

child's needs, they unfold automatically and maximize outcomes for the child's development. When children are required to do something that they are not interested in, their attention is divided, and they are unable to focus on what is in front of them. External attempts to force a child to be interested in an object lead to a separation between the object and the child. Feelings of enjoyment that are generated from external stimulation are not comparable to the child's true interest, and such an approach will not generate any constructive power for the child. In his work 'Democracy and Education', Dewey showed that play activities have the power to facilitate learning (Wujin & Hui 2012). When learning activities become pleasurable for children by being formatted as play activities, their interest in learning is enhanced. When engaging in play activities, children think on their own and invent tools, fully utilizing their knowledge and abilities, a process through which their growth progresses.

Play provides children with opportunities to create things and to satisfy their interests and passions; in addition, it offers an avenue through which to teach them the uses of learning. As children get older, the purpose of play becomes more complex, and the process of play becomes more complicated. In his description of older children's play, Dewey referred to dramatic activities, which he considered to be the epitome of play adapted for older children. The play of older children has the potential to make abstract objects real, to give meaning and purpose to abstract things, and to create demand for tools and knowledge during play. This can lead to various abilities, knowledge, and personal experiences actively used in play that are quite different in quality from the knowledge obtained from textbooks (Keyong 2012).

To increase children's interest in learning art, I argue that a new approach for art appreciation should be created and that for this purpose, Dewey's (2003) ideas regarding interest and play are useful. The approach centers play as a pedagogical means that enhances children's interests. Dewey's educational theory indicates that the key to increasing students' interest is whether the goals of the activities are aligned with their inner needs. If they are aligned, then children will naturally be interested in the activities. In my approach, play functions to provide opportunities for the children's active use of abilities, skills, and experiences. Appreciation abilities and

skills as a goal of such activities are acquired in the process of playing, and they become children's power, effective outside the classroom and helpful in improving social aspects of their daily lives. It is expected that even outside the classroom, children will maintain an active interest in learning art.

The next step to advance the quality of art education in China is to create classroom activities using this new approach in which play is central. In such a classroom activity, children engage in play-based activities for art appreciation in which they express their own views, experiment with their own ways of understanding art, and construct and reconstruct their own viewpoints. Dewey's educational theories of interest and play are both useful to create a new framework for art appreciation activities aimed at assisting children in developing self-directed thinking, cultivating feelings, and becoming life-long learners of art.

CONCLUSION

This literature review on Chinese children's interest in art education reveals that the current art curriculum is lacking in the study of art appreciation activities. To achieve equitable and high-quality education for all, as specified in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, it is critical to increase all children's interest in art appreciation activities at the elementary-school stage. Art appreciation, which is among the most important types of activities for acquiring aesthetic skills and abilities, should involve students engaging in studying art based on their own interests.

Play activities that foster children's own interests should be incorporated into art appreciation to enhance the quality of education in China. In the future, research should focus on developing effective classroom activities related to art appreciation based on this new approach to help children become active life-long learners in regard to art.

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