This paper reports the analysis of a 2013-14 survey of Tasmanian general early childhood and primary teachers regarding their use of the visual arts in their classrooms. The sample for this survey consisted of primary schools in the Department of Education, Catholic and Independent systems in Tasmania, and whilst there is a reported bias in these data due to the optional nature of participation it is possible to draw conclusions based upon the findings. Data indicated that the vast majority of respondents positively valued the visual arts in their practice, they were included at least once per week in their classrooms and the majority of respondents integrated the visual arts with other curriculum areas when taught. Pre-service training, self-efficacy, practicum experience and ‘valuing’ of the visual arts all played a role in determining the amount of visual arts taught in classrooms. Finally, these data suggest that school support for the visual arts does affect its inclusion. Those who rated school support as ‘very well supported’ or ‘supported’ (10, or 24.4%) had a teacher or senior staff member who supported the visual arts, they also had better resources, a better budget, and they enjoyed more collaboration with other staff.

Introduction

In Australian primary schools, as in many other countries, the responsibility for teaching the visual arts is largely ceded to generalist classroom teachers (Bamford, 2002; Davis, 2012; Garvis, 2009; Garvis & Pendergast, 2011, Roy, Baker & Hamilton, 2015). In Tasmanian primary schools this is also the case. The Tasmanian Department of Education (2007) defines the Arts as inclusive of five Art forms, and suggests that students should be given a “peak experience” in one art form and “experience” of the others in any given year (p. 2). Thus there is no suggestion that a comprehensive visual arts education is a requirement for any Tasmanian primary school student. Whilst there are some Department of Education (DoE), Catholic and Independent schools that do employ specialist visual art specialist teachers in Tasmania the majority of visual art teaching in DoE schools is done by generalist classroom teachers. Visual art education in Tasmanian schools is therefore patchy at best. The situation in Tasmanian early childhood classrooms may be a little better with early childhood educators having access to the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) to integrate broad Arts learning into classrooms; yet, once again, visual art learning tends to be treated as an aspect of the Arts rather than as core. With time pressures on an already crowded curriculum, a lack of time in pre-service teacher training, and a focus on literacy, numeracy and standardised testing, visual arts education presently faces a ‘perfect storm’ of neglect in many primary and early childhood classrooms.

With the majority of visual arts education in these classrooms being undertaken by generalist teachers, the researchers were keen to investigate their perspectives about the visual arts in their teaching practice. Drawn from a broader mixed methods study as part of a Master of Education program this paper explores the analysis of a 2013-14 survey of Tasmanian general primary and early childhood
teachers regarding their use of the visual arts in their general classrooms. This stage of the broader study was intended to collect current data about the status of visual arts education in Tasmanian generalist primary and early childhood classrooms. This paper explores the question: How do Tasmanian generalist primary and early childhood teachers describe their use of the visual arts in their teaching practice? Primary schools in the Department of Education, Catholic and Independent systems in Tasmania (n=190) were contacted to participate and 41 responses were received (22%).

Data regarding generalist teachers’ descriptions of their use of the visual arts in their practice, including: the regularity of visual arts inclusion, perceptions of its importance, prior training, preparedness and confidence to teach the visual arts, openness to professional learning, and perceptions of school support for the visual arts are analysed herein. Data were analysed through inductive category construction (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Hatch, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Sarantakos, 2005). The analysis of data highlighted two themes in the ways in which respondents described their use of the visual arts: ‘It’s important; but…’, and ‘There’s confidence; but…’. These two themes contain seemingly inherent contradictions that serve to illustrate the complexity of this space.

The first theme ‘It’s important; but…’ highlights the prima facie importance that most respondents assigned to the visual arts. However, those data about the regularity with which the visual arts were included in classrooms and the descriptions of levels of support for the visual arts in schools seem to contradict this expression of value. Likewise only 4 respondents described a lack of confidence to teach the visual arts, however 21 respondents, which were just over half (51.2%), described inadequate preparation by pre-service teacher training programs in the visual arts. This suggests a contradiction and raises the question: If pre-service training was inadequate where do these high levels of confidence come from? These data and themes are explored herein.

**Literature**

The status of the visual arts in primary and early childhood general classrooms is often characterised negatively with reference to a number of contributing factors including: reduced time for pre-service teacher training in the visual arts, a crowded school curriculum resulting in less time for the visual arts in schools, and a simultaneous emphasis on literacy, numeracy and standardised testing. International studies (Andrews, 2004; Bae, 2004; Bell, 2010; Bowell, 2010; Bresler, 1992; Ford, 2003; Freedman, 2000; Hausman, Ploof, Duignan, Brown & Hostert, 2010; Holt, 2006; Laird, 2012; Pavlou, 2004; Winner 2007) have expressed growing concern for the state of visual arts education in primary schools. As stated by Ford (2003), “after reading the literature, we are often left with a negative image of what goes on in the primary sector in our subject” (p.264).

According to Bamford (2006), ‘the majority of art teaching in primary schools is done by generalist teachers’ (p. 75) and this is also true for early childhood contexts. Thus the training of pre-service teachers in visual arts education becomes significant when investigating the status of the visual arts in primary and early childhood education. Due to declining access to quality pre-service training in visual arts education for generalists many school students do not receive the benefits that a comprehensive visual arts education can offer, and often become disinterested in the visual arts from an early age (Bamford, 2002; Davis, 2008; Eisner, 1997; Fiske, 1999; Ford, 2003; Roy, Baker & Hamilton, 2015). Several other international and national studies support this, finding that teachers need to be well trained to teach the visual arts effectively, however in the current climate, teachers often do not feel that they have been trained to teach this subject effectively (Andrews, 2004; Bae, 2004; Bell, 2010; Bowell, 2010; Bresler, 1992; Ford, 2003; Freedman, 2000; Hausman, Ploof, Duignan, Brown & Hostert, 2010; Holt, 2006; Laird, 2012; Pavlou, 2004; Winner, 2007).
Standardised testing has also had a negative impact on the status of the visual arts in primary schools. Recent research conducted in Australia into visual arts education in primary schools expresses concerns about the effects of the National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) on other areas of curriculum (Dulfer, Polesel & Rice, 2013). In this environment, due to a lack of accountability for visual arts, the curriculum areas for which teachers are accountable such as literacy and numeracy can monopolise teaching and learning in the classroom. In June 2013 the Whitlam Institute submitted a report to the Commonwealth Senate that demonstrated the findings of their research that sought ‘to examine the questions concerning the high stakes testing regime within the context of the purposes of education, and the best interests of the children’ (Dulfer, Polesel & Rice, p.2). An online survey conducted with Australian teachers as part of this research found one of the unintended effects of NAPLAN included ‘narrowing of teaching strategies and of the curriculum’ (p.5).

With a congested curriculum, time spent teaching the visual arts in primary classrooms continues to diminish as teachers feel pressure to spend more time teaching literacy and numeracy (Bowell, 2011; Bresler, 1992; Ford, 2003; Garvis & Pendergast, 2010; Gibson & Ewing, 2011; Lobascher, 2011; Mishook & Kornhaber, 2006; Patty, 2011). Garvis and Pendergast (2010) found this pressure was linked with the NAPLAN standardised testing which began in 2008. This study voiced concerns for the subjects that are not tested, particularly the Arts, asking the question ‘does arts education have a future in Australia against literacy and numeracy?’ (p.111).

Despite the growing body of research ‘affirming that learning in the Arts can ensure children are more engaged in deep learning and critical, creative thinking processes’ (Gibson & Ewing, 2011, p.212), the prominent view reflected in the literature is that visual arts is not being taught effectively in Australian schools (Alter, Hays O’Hara, 2009; Davis, 2008; Garvis & Pendergast, 2010, 2011; Gibson & Ewing, 2011; McArdle, 2012; Paris, 2006; Welch, 1995; Wright, 2011).

Method

Surveys, as stated by O’Leary (2010) are ‘the process of collecting data by asking a range of individuals the same questions related to their characteristics, attributes, how they live, or their opinions through questionnaire’ (p.181). This survey was conducted using Survey Monkey, in order to easily access a large population and ‘produce quick results’ (Sarantakos, 2005, p.263). This type of data collection is commonly used by social researchers and is an effective way to find out information from a larger population (Burns, 2000; Creswell, 2012; Denscombe, 2007; Hatch, 2002; Sarantakos, 2005). Surveys have the ability to reach a large number of respondents who can easily be compared, generate qualitative and quantitative data and be anonymous (O’Leary, 2010). The survey included questions to elicit both quantitative and qualitative responses, and asked both open questions, and closed questions using a Likert scale response format. According to Creswell (2012) ‘the advantage of this type of questioning is that your predetermined closed-ended responses can net useful information to support theories and concepts in the literature’ (p.220).

The survey was developed with reference to the literature and to the research questions that formed the basis of the broader study. In order to investigate the status of visual arts education in generalist classrooms it was necessary to collect data that was broad in nature and that established the scope of visual arts education in Tasmanian primary schools. In addition to soliciting demographic information, the survey included ‘scoping’ questions regarding the regularity of inclusion of the visual arts in teaching, and the importance ascribed to visual arts education by teachers. Other questions focussed on their confidence and preparedness to teach the visual arts, levels of pre-service training and the levels of school support for teaching the visual arts. Once trialled a link to the survey was distributed to all relevant Department of Education (DoE) schools via their internal alerts system, and
emailed to the representatives of the Catholic Education Office (CEO) and Independent Schools Tasmania (IST) who agreed to distribute the link to all schools in their respective systems.

There are many difficulties in calculating a response rate for this survey because no definitive schools list exists, early childhood centres are represented differently to primary schools (sometimes they are included with schools and sometimes not), and finally there is a bias in the data created by the optional nature of participation. However, from these three systems there were 41 responses indicating a tentative, approximate response rate of 22%. Because recruitment of survey respondents was done via the information sharing resources of each school system the actual number of potential respondents is extremely difficult to calculate. And so whilst there were 41 responses, the number of generalist K-6 teachers is far more than just 190 (the approximate number of schools advised of the project). Thus the response rate may actually be far lower.

Data and analysis

As stated earlier the survey collected demographic information from respondents about such variables as age, gender, teaching experience, grade levels taught and teaching location. This was intended to provide context to the study. Of the 41 respondents 33 (80.48%) were female, 4 (9.76%) were male and 4 (9.76%) did not answer this question. The vast majority of respondents (n=31 or 83.7%) were located in the North and North West of the State. The researchers are also located in the North and North West of the state, however such an imbalance in the locations of respondents was not anticipated, and thus some caution is indicated here as there may be bias in these data due to the voluntary nature of the survey.

There was a broad range of ages amongst respondents, with the majority 14 (37.8%) falling between the ages of 31 and 40, 11 (29.7%) being aged between 51 and 60, 5 (13.5%) between the ages of 41 and 50, 4 (10.8%) were over 60, and 3 (8.2%) were aged between 21 and 30. The majority of respondents 17 (45.9%), taught Prep – grade 2, 16 (43.2%) taught grade 3-4, 12 (32.4%) respondents taught grade 5-6 and 4 (10.8%) taught Birth – Kindergarten, some taught across grades and responded to more than one option.

As presented earlier, in answering the question ‘How do Tasmanian generalist primary and early childhood teachers describe their use of the visual arts in their teaching practice?’, the analysis of data highlighted two themes: ‘It’s important; but…’, and ‘There’s confidence; but…’. These two themes contain seemingly inherent contradictions that serve to illustrate the complexity of this space, and are discussed next.

Theme 1: It’s important; but…

The first theme ‘It’s important; but...’ highlights the importance that most respondents attributed to the visual arts. However, those data about perceptions of levels of support for the visual arts in schools and to a lesser extent those data about the regularity with which the visual arts were included in classrooms seem to contradict this expression of value.

Respondent perceptions of the importance of visual arts

The question ‘how important is visual arts within your teaching practice?’ was asked in order to establish what value respondents placed on visual arts in education. As may be seen in Table 1 data suggested that the visual arts was generally seen as important by respondents with 10 (24.4%) respondents selecting ‘Essential’, 13 (31.7%) respondents selecting ‘Important’ and 10 (24.4%) respondents selecting ‘Very Important’. These data therefore indicate that the vast majority of respondents 33 (80.5%) positively valued the visual arts in education. Again some caution is indicated here as there may very well be bias in these data due to the voluntary nature of the survey. Although
there were still 3 (7.3%) respondents who selected ‘Not Important’ or ‘Unnecessary’ in respect of this question, suggesting that a lack of understanding regarding the value of the visual art in education was evident.

Table 1

**Respondent perceptions of the importance of visual arts**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Essential</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>24.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Important</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>24.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>31.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Important</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unnecessary</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Response</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respondents were also given the opportunity to expand on their Likert scale response by providing further comments. Respondent 1 stated that ‘all students can find common ground with their learning, in any part of the curriculum, through art’, this response was interesting because the respondent, through experience had found that visual arts could help students learn in other areas of the curriculum. Respondent 6 answered ‘I believe that visual art is essential for all sorts of reasons. Especially confidence and self-esteem’, they saw a link between the impact of visual arts on developing confidence and self-esteem in children. This comment linked well with that of Respondent 8, who stated ‘as children grow in their visual arts skills they grow in confidence and self-esteem. Some children that do not shine academically and with sport have great success in the arts. It is an important way to share knowledge and express feelings and respond to texts’. Respondent 21 explained the value of visual arts in a kindergarten classroom by answering that ‘visual art is a vital part of the kinder program. It is how these children communicate and express themselves’. Respondent 23 similarly states the communicative importance of the visual arts, writing that ‘it's an integral part of my program and the way the children can communicate and express their ideas, even at an early age’.

However Respondent 29 did not see visual arts as a stand-alone subject, only as a tool to assist with learning, stating ‘I enjoy teaching art but it is seen as a tool to assist in other areas rather than just a stand-alone subject’. Another respondent did not ‘feel [they] ha[d] the skills to teach it with any depth’ even though they ‘believe it’s an important aspect of teaching’ (Respondent 30). Similarly Respondent 39 suggested that they did not feel confident teaching visual arts, but they saw it as an important subject, stating that ‘although I'm not so confident with teaching visual arts and don't really see myself as creative, it is as important as any other KLA and the children really enjoy it so it is vital’. From these qualitative responses it was evident that, as was the case with the analysis of quantitative data, the majority of respondents viewed the visual arts as an important part of the curriculum, however several lacked confidence in their ability to teach it. When comparing data between this question and the question in relation to the regularity of the inclusion of visual arts in classrooms, it became apparent that those who taught visual arts more regularly were also those who valued the visual arts, and those who did not include visual arts in their teaching practice or did so very rarely indicated that they did not value the visual arts.
The regularity of visual arts in their teaching practice.

The regularity with which respondents taught the visual arts in their classrooms seems to somewhat contradict the importance respondents attributed to the visual arts. As may be seen in Table 2 participants were asked to select the response which on average ‘best describes the regularity of visual arts in their teaching practice’.

Table 2
The regularity of the visual arts in teaching practice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I include visual arts in my classroom every day</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I include visual arts in my classroom most days in the week</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I include visual arts in my classroom several times a week</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>26.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I include visual arts in my classroom around once a week</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>29.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I include visual arts in my classroom rarely</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t include visual arts in my classroom</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Response</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most numerous selection, 12 (29.3%), indicated that respondents used visual arts in their classrooms around once a week and the next numerous, 11 (26.8%), response was several times a week. These data indicate that the vast majority of respondents 34 (83%) did teach visual arts in their classrooms each week, however only less than 10% or 4 respondents included the visual arts in their classrooms each day. Data from this answer were compared with the grade that these respondents taught and no link was found between the grade the respondent taught and the regularity of their visual arts teaching. Thus these data indicate that the regularity of inclusion of visual arts in a classroom was not related to the age group being taught. Unfortunately these data do not indicate the amount of time spent on the visual arts by respondents, a gap also identified more broadly in First we see: The national review of visual education (Davis, 2008, p. 111).

School support for visual arts education

Whilst attitudes to the visual arts were positive and there was a level of presence in the curriculum (even if this was generally somewhat limited), the perceived levels of support for the visual arts by schools were very low. Respondents were asked to rate the support provided by their school for them to implement the visual arts in their teaching practice. 2 (4.9%) indicated that they were ‘very well supported’ and 8 (19.5%) that they were ‘supported’. 16 (39.0%) respondents answered that they had ‘some support’, however 10 (24.4%) respondents answered that they received no ‘active’ support. Based on these data around one quarter of respondents believed that the inclusion of visual arts in their classrooms was not supported by their school. Data indicated that those who responded that they had no support also lacked confidence, skills and knowledge in the visual arts. When compared with other questions data showed that those respondents who rated the support from their school as ‘very well supported’ or ‘supported’ (10, or 24.4%) had a teacher or senior staff member who was passionate about the visual arts, they also had better resources, a better budget and there was more staff collaboration and staff learning from one another. Thus these data suggest that school support for the visual arts does affect its inclusion.
Theme 2: There’s confidence; but…

As stated earlier only 4 respondents described a lack of confidence to teach the visual arts, however 21 respondents (51.2%) described inadequate preparation by pre-service teacher training programs in the visual arts. This suggests a contradiction and the question: If pre-service training was inadequate where do these high levels of confidence come from?

Levels of pre-service training

When asked to identify the response which best described their pre-service training in visual arts the majority of respondents 15 (36.6%) indicated that they ‘completed 2 or more visual arts units in my Education Degree’, 9 (22%) respondents completed 1 visual arts unit, 6 (14.6%) completed some training, 2 (4.9%) did not complete any pre-service training in visual arts, 3 (7.3%) completed a Visual Art Degree or Diploma, and 1 (2.4%) had only experienced visual arts whilst on their undergraduate practicum. Davis (2008) suggests that the average number of hours in visual arts education completed in pre-service teacher training was 26, the equivalent of less than one unit of study (p. 180). How ‘units’ are defined between universities and over time does perhaps make a comparison of these data problematic, hence respondent self-evaluation of preparedness to teach may be a more reliable means of establishing the effectiveness of pre-service training.

When comparing these pre-service training data with those regarding the value respondents placed on the visual arts it was evident that those with more pre-service training in the visual arts were those who also placed most value on it. Thus the 18 respondents (43.9%) who received more pre-service training in visual arts (1 or 2 units in an Education degree or a Visual Art degree or diploma) placed more value on the visual arts compared to those with less pre-service training. The relationship between pre-service training and value was exemplified in those data from Respondent 10 who indicated that they had not received any visual arts pre-service training and likewise did not see the visual arts as important in their classroom.

There was also a relationship between respondents’ ability to both integrate visual arts into other curriculum areas and to teach visual arts discretely, and the amount of pre-service training they received. Respondents 6 and 34 (4.9%) completed Visual Arts Degrees, were teaching in the general classroom, and taught visual arts both as a discrete learning area and also integrated it with other subjects. Both respondents, perhaps unsurprisingly, also indicated that they felt extremely confident in their ability to teach visual arts. However most other respondents taught visual arts as either one or the other (discretely or integrated), thus illustrating that those with more visual arts training had the ability to be more pedagogically flexible in regards to their visual arts teaching.

Preparedness to teach the visual arts

When asked if they thought their pre-service training prepared them to teach the visual arts in their classroom, 15 (36.6%) of the respondents answered ‘Yes’ while 21 respondents, which were just over half (51.2%), answered ‘No’ (Note: 5 respondents or 12.2% did not answer this question). This demonstrates that a majority of the respondents did not feel they were adequately trained to teach visual arts. This is consistent with Davis (2012) who found that pre-service teachers do lack the self-efficacy to teach visual arts. Those who felt their pre-service training to be most valuable were all aged over 41 years and had been teaching for in excess of 11 years. Respondent 11 recognised that ‘it is a much more broad field now than it was when I trained’, which perhaps showed their perception that there was a lot more that pre-service teachers needed to learn now than was previously the case.

Qualitative data from respondents who trained over a decade ago showed that they believed that they had been taught by good lecturers who taught them essential skills in an educational context.
Respondent 8 stated ‘we had two wonderful visual art tutors who taught us a range of skills in a variety of art mediums with mostly practical learning’. Respondent 21 wrote ‘I had an outstanding lecturer Edward Broomhall who had a huge impact on me. He was passionate about visual art and this influenced me greatly’. Respondent 23 stated ‘I became more confident as I studied printmaking etc. and also had 2 wonderful lecturers in Art who were great role models and teachers of the value of Art for children in the daily curriculum’. And Respondent 33 stated ‘I was fortunate enough to train under the guidance of the late Terry Woodward and also Edward Broomhall. I completed several units of study as part of my 3 year training (1970-72). I also completed a unit on Studies in Craft as part of my B.Ed. (Bachelor of Education)’.

Some of those who did not feel that they were adequately trained in visual arts indicated that they had learnt more through other teachers and through self-study once they had started teaching themselves. Respondent 14 stated ‘my art knowledge has been gained from work experiences, and self-study. Uni[versity] did not provide what life experiences had already taught’, while Respondent 29 stated ‘I had a year teaching grade 7 Art with an [sic] excellent Art teacher helping me out. That prepared me so much more than what is offered in the degree’. Respondent 16 wrote ‘too limited in time, experiences, mostly learn while teaching, especially from other teachers’. Respondent 39 did not find their visual arts pre-service training adequate ‘because it was not relevant to primary school children and it seemed more like an adult art class’. Those who indicated that their pre-service training was inadequate and suggested that insufficient time was spent on how to teach the visual arts indicated that they perceived their pre-service training to be more about the creation of their own artworks. Respondent 1 stated ‘it was not enough for me and I have an avid interest in this area. The unit covered too much over too short a period and it did not allow for us to share and explore further opportunities’, Respondent 28 wrote ‘The units at Uni[versity] are very limited and for me did not give very many examples of how to integrate art in to the classroom and how to make links with other areas of the curriculum’. It became evident from these data that those who trained several years ago (Respondents 8, 21, 23 and 26) believed that they received quality visual arts pre-service training. Those who did not feel they were adequately trained received their pre-service training more recently and believed that they had learnt more when they started teaching through colleagues and self-study.

**Confidence to teach visual arts**

As may be seen in Table 3 respondents were asked to rate their ‘confidence to teach visual arts’, with 22 respondents (53.6%) indicating confidence in varying degrees, only 4 (9.8%) indicating a lack of confidence to teach visual arts in their classrooms and 10 indicating that they ‘get by’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3</th>
<th>Confidence to teach visual arts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Response</td>
<td>Count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extremely Confident</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confident</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I get by</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I lack confidence</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have no confidence</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Response</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interestingly data did not suggest connections between age, years of teaching, or grade taught and respondent confidence to teach the visual arts. It was however evident that those who were ‘Extremely Confident’ 9 (21.9%) or ‘Confident’ 13 (31.7%) also taught the visual arts more regularly. There were 4 (9.8%) respondents who ‘lacked confidence’ and 10 (24.4%) who indicated that they ‘get by’, and when asked how often they taught the visual arts answered either that they do not teach
it at all, or that they rarely taught it, which demonstrates clearly that teacher confidence did affect regularity. Data also indicated that those who lacked confidence to teach visual arts also considered visual arts as unimportant and did not feel their training prepared them adequately.

**Interest in further professional learning**

When asked if they would ‘like to develop their skills and knowledge of visual arts further’ a majority of respondents 24 (58.5%) indicated that they would, 12 (29.3%) respondents indicated ‘maybe’, and none of the respondents, even those who did not regard the visual arts as important, answered ‘no’ (note 5 or 12.2% did not respond to this question). In qualitative elaborations for this question those respondents who indicated ‘maybe’ tended to be apprehensive about what the visual arts professional learning would be about, such as Respondent 2 who stated ‘depending on what is on offer. Most professional development I do is related to literacy or numeracy’. Other similar responses included ‘time poor, but willing’ (Respondent 34), and ‘I do some reading from the school library to improve my knowledge, but my time is fairly committed already’ (Respondent 8). Respondent 3 stated that ‘it works for me in primary, but with all competing areas in the Australian Curriculum, I am on my way to not wanting to tackle any extra learning - I think I am on the way to combat fatigue’. As stated in the literature, this is consistent with the diminishing time spent teaching visual arts in primary classrooms as teachers feel pressure to spend more time teaching literacy and numeracy (Bowell, 2011; Bresler, 1992; Ford, 2003; Garvis & Pendergast, 2010; Gibson & Ewing, 2011; Lobascher, 2011; Mishook & Kornhaber, 2006; Patty, 2011).

**Conclusion**

This study has made some important initial findings in the area of visual arts education in Tasmanian primary and early childhood classrooms. It has, however, some important limitations, such as the inability to establish an accurate response rate, and the voluntary nature of responses that may impact on these data. In exploring the question ‘How do Tasmanian generalist primary and early childhood teachers describe their use of the visual arts in their teaching practice?’ this paper has highlighted two themes that seem to contain important inherent contradictions. It is in these contradictions that the research question is answered and through which directions for future research become clear.

The first theme ‘It’s important; but…’ is important because it suggests a fundamental acknowledgement by respondents that the visual arts are an important part of education, although this was not uniformly evident across responses, with a small number indicating a contrary belief. This level of support for the value of the visual arts is important as a starting point for improved outcomes for primary and early childhood students. The regularity with which the visual arts are included in the classrooms of respondents is also a significant factor in their descriptions of their practice. Whilst there was some curriculum presence evident the extent of it varied and can perhaps be interpreted as a minimum level of inclusion. The regularity with which respondents taught the visual arts in their classrooms seems to somewhat contradict the importance respondents attributed to the visual arts. Furthermore, the lack of data regarding the amount of time visual arts was included in classes suggests an important are for further research. Further investigation of the attitudes of school leaders towards the visual arts is also suggested, with respondents’ perceptions of support being quite low, and having consequent impact upon the teaching of the visual arts. Finally, these data suggest that school support for the visual arts does affect its inclusion in general classrooms. 10 (24.4%) respondents who felt supported to include the visual arts by their schools referred to support from another teacher or senior staff member, resources and budget provided, and collaboration between staff. This is a highly significant finding when considered alongside literature that suggest a congested curriculum, diminishing time for the visual arts as more time is spent teaching literacy and numeracy and in preparing for standardised tests such as NAPLAN.
The second theme ‘There’s confidence; but…’ also highlights an inherent contradiction that suggests a need for further research. With only 4 respondents describing a lack of confidence to teach the visual arts, but the majority describing inadequate preparation by pre-service teacher training programs, two important further questions are raised. Firstly ‘if teachers are inadequately prepared to teach this area, and are likewise unaware of visual professional learning, yet teach confidently what is the quality of that teaching?’ And secondly ‘If pre-service training was inadequate where do these high levels of confidence come from?’ This study has made some important initial steps in establishing the place of the visual arts in the practice of general classroom teachers. However, further investigation of key areas as indicated above will provide further depth to these initial data, contributing to the body of knowledge in this area and suggesting directions for improved outcomes in visual arts education.

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