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## **The Meaningful Memories of Visual Arts Education for Preservice Generalist Teachers: What is Remembered, Why, and from Where?**

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### **Abstract**

Research that examines generalist preservice teachers' memories from the viewpoint of a specific subject is scarce. As generalist teachers' self-efficacy varies between subjects, subject-oriented research is needed. This qualitative study explores the meaningful memories of visual arts education for twenty-one preservice generalist teachers in Finland. The data, analyzed via an abductive approach and a constant comparison method, consists of participants' written memories. According to the findings, the nature of preservice generalist teachers' memories of visual arts

education is a result of negotiation between personal (i.e., their personal relationship with visual arts) and structural (i.e., changes in curricula) aspects. Teachers were presented as playing important mediatory roles between these two domains, as both the positive and negative memories of the participants often included personified descriptions of their teachers. The implications for both visual arts and teacher education are also provided.

### **Introduction**

In this paper, we explore the memories of visual arts education among twenty-one preservice generalist teachers in Finland. The memories are explored from different phases along the teachers' paths of institutional education. By "generalist teachers," we refer to early childhood and classroom teachers (working in primary education) who are not specialists in any particular subject but, to paraphrase Rusanen (2007), know a little about everything. The strong relationship between preservice teachers' school memories and their views of idealistic teaching has been identified and confirmed by numerous studies (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2001; Lortie, 1975; Miller & Shifflet, 2016; Pellikka, Lutovac, & Kaasila, 2018). Nevertheless, as we are about to demonstrate, unstudied terrains still remain.

With the exception of mathematics education (e.g., Lutovac & Kaasila, 2011, 2012), research that examines generalist preservice teachers' memories from the viewpoint of a specific subject is scarce (Miller & Schiffler, 2016; Pellikka et al., 2018). Subject-oriented research approaches are needed, as generalist teachers' self-efficacy varies between subjects. Generalist teachers have reported lower self-efficacy when teaching arts than when teaching academic subjects such as literacy and mathematics (e.g., Alter, Hays, & O'Hara, 2009; Garvis & Pendergast, 2011; Hatfield, Montana, & Deffenbaugh, 2006). Various explanations have been provided for this phenomenon. According to one such explanation, the arts are considered to be fundamentally different from academic subjects due to their creative and expressive nature. Specialized visual arts teachers consider their artistic identity as an essential part of their teacher identity (Hatfield et al., 2006). They often consider themselves "artist-teachers" rather than "art teachers," for whom visual arts is mainly a curricular subject (Hall, 2010; Shreeve, 2009). The vast majority of generalist teachers do not have such a strong artistic identity. One important factor in the shaping of generalist teachers' perceptions of visual arts education is their own experiences and memories from their visual arts classes (Garvis & Pendergast, 2010). To conclude, more needs to be known about generalist preservice teachers' experiences of arts education. This study contributes to this issue by exploring the memories of visual arts education in preservice generalist teachers. The following questions have guided the research process:

- What kind of meaningful visual arts education memories do preservice generalist teachers have?
- Which phases of education do these memories come from?
- What makes these memories meaningful?

## **Background**

### ***Visual Arts Education in a Finnish Educational Context***

In Finland, the teaching of visual arts begins during early childhood education until upper-secondary school. During these phases, differences arise in the teaching of visual arts according to its quantity and centrality. In early childhood education, (visual) arts is viewed as an important way of enhancing children's learning and self-expression (Finnish National Board of Education [FNBoE], 2016a), while drawing is viewed as a common leisure activity for children (Olafsdottir & Einarsdottir, 2017). In primary, secondary, and upper-secondary school visual arts is a standalone subject that students' study for, at most, one hour per week (FNBoE, 2015; 2016a). In primary school, visual arts is a compulsory subject (FNBoE, 2016a). In secondary and upper-secondary school, there are one or two compulsory courses, and it is possible to choose visual arts education as an optional subject to study (FNBoE, 2015, 2016a). Another difference in relation to the teaching of visual arts during different educational phases relates to teacher qualifications: In early childhood and primary education, visual arts is taught by generalist teachers; in secondary and upper-secondary school, visual arts is taught by specialized subject teachers. In Finland, subject teachers in secondary school must have studied modules equaling to at least sixty credits in their main subject<sup>1</sup>. In upper-secondary school, the required amount is 120 credits (Teaching Qualifications Decree 986/1998). With teacher education for generalist teachers, the mandatory amount of credits is five.

The objectives of visual arts education are outlined in the curricula for each education level (FNBoE, 2015, 2016a, 2016b, & 2016c). The Finnish National Core Curricula for Early Childhood and Pre-Primary Education presents three main objectives for art education: the arts as an experience and expression, the arts as cognitive and learning skills, and the arts as cultural education (FNBoE, 2016b, 2016c). These three themes can be recognized as the overarching art educational objectives in Finnish education. Objectives similar to these are also commonly present in international discussions. According to Bae (2004), in the making of art, personal thoughts, concepts, emotions, and experiences are shared publicly, and art can be a medium for a child to express their thoughts and experiences before they are able to use

<sup>1</sup> According to the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System. Retrieved 28.3.2020  
[https://ec.europa.eu/education/resources-and-tools/european-credit-transfer-and-accumulation-system-ects\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/resources-and-tools/european-credit-transfer-and-accumulation-system-ects_en)

words. The importance of visual arts is also justified due to its beneficial impact on children's general learning (Althouse, Johnson, & Mitchell, 2003), as it offers them the opportunity for physical and motor training and cognitive and socio-emotional development (Rusanen, 2009).

Discipline-based art education, as a postmodern form of visual art education (Efland 1990; Efland, Freedman, & Stuhr, 1996/1998), could be interpreted as emphasizing the importance of visual arts education as a school subject and justifying its existence in the educational system alongside academic subjects. In addition, visual arts education, as a supporting subject, is said to have positive effects on the development of children's academic performance, thinking and creativity, and social and behavioral skills (Gullatt, 2007; Winner, Goldstein, & Vincent-Lancrin, 2013). Visual art education is also considered to be a form of cultural education (e.g., Pääjoki, 2004; Pohjakallio, 2005; Räsänen, 2008), and according to some scholars, it could (or should) be termed "visual culture education" instead of "visual arts education" (e.g., Duncum, 2015; Pohjakallio, 2005; Räsänen, 2008).

### ***Memories of Schools and Teachers***

In their study on newly qualified teachers' art memories, Garvis and Pendergast (2010) found that participants had positive memories of arts education from their childhood (see also Lummis, Morris, & Paolino, 2014); whereas memories from their teenage years (i.e., secondary school) were crowded with negative memories, and the participants criticized their teenage-era visual arts teachers' as being too skill-focused and critical. This example illustrates how teachers are considered the main influencers of students' school memories (e.g., Chang-Kredl & Kingsley, 2014; Uitto, 2012; Uitto, Lutovac, Jokikokko, & Kasila, 2018). Thus, it is rather unsurprising that the majority of the extant literature has focused on preservice teachers' memories of their own teachers (e.g., Hudson, Usak, Fančovičová, Erdoğan, & Prokop, 2010; Miller & Shifflet, 2016; Pellikka et al., 2018).

Previous research has provided two intertwined frameworks to better understand the multidimensionality of what a teacher is: The first framework is the teacher as a person, and the second is the teacher as a curriculum provider. The first approach emphasizes that teachers are, first and foremost, people whose subjective values, preferences, and life-histories are present in their pedagogical decisions (Uitto, 2012). To cite Clandinin and Huber (2005), "[t]eachers teach who they are" (p. 43). To further demonstrate this, the extant literature on artist-teachers' professional identities suggests that it is difficult for artist-teachers to distinguish their personal artistic ambitions and preferences from their roles as art teachers (Hall, 2010; Hatfield et al., 2006; Shreeve, 2009). This viewpoint is supported by Kallio (2005), who argues that specialized artist-teachers' and their teenage students' perceptions of visual arts and visual arts education do not always meet, and what teachers consider inspirational and magical can be dull and vague for students.

The second approach posits that teachers' decisions and actions are always guided by national, local, and school-level curricula (Wermke, Olason, & Salokangas, 2018). One explanation for the strong contrast between art education memories in primary and secondary school (Garvis & Pengergast, 2010) can be due to the differences concerning the principles of visual arts education in different phases of institutional education. For example, since the 1970s, the guiding pedagogical principles of early childhood visual arts education in Finland have emphasized project-like methods and children's own artistic cultures (Rusanen, 2007). In practice, this means that the process of making art is considered more important than the final artistic product (Rusanen, 2007). In secondary school, the role and pedagogics of visual arts education are different. Kallio (2005) notes that the demand for artistic self-expression in secondary school can be daunting for some students, as the ability to express and deal with one's feelings through visual means is not a natural form of reflection for all. The curriculum, however, is not a gravity-like natural law. In the Finnish context, teachers have high levels of autonomy, and while the national curriculum provides general objectives, teachers can choose their own teaching methods and materials quite freely (Paronen & Lappi, 2018).

To summarize, the age of students needs to be kept in constant consideration, as age appears to influence their evaluation of school experiences. In other words, when comparing students' visual arts education memories at different phases of their educational path, it is important to acknowledge that students' educational motivation tends to be lowest during their time in secondary school. For example, the most recent Finnish School Health Survey revealed that 82% of fourth graders, 60% of eighth graders, and 72% of upper-secondary school students reported that they enjoyed being at school (National Institute for Health and Welfare, 2017). International review studies have also identified that in compulsory education, students' attitudes decline as a function of grade level (Silverman & Subramaniam, 1999). Thus, it is worth questioning to what extent the bad reviews for visual arts education in secondary school are reflections of the participants' general attitude toward school in that phase.

## **Methodology**

### ***Researching Memories***

The traditional scholarly definition of "memory" refers to an individual's cognitive ability to intentionally memorize disconnected segments of information (i.e., the number of unrelated words), whereas in colloquial language, the use of the word "memory" refers to an individual's ability to remember past experiences in a coherent fashion (Holland & Kensinger, 2010). In a scholarly context, the colloquial meaning is typically referred to as "autobiographical memory" in order to avoid any misconceptions (Bluck, 2003). In this study, we are most interested in autobiographical memories. In line with previous research on (autobiographical) teacher memories, we use the term "memory" synonymously with

“autobiographical memory” (see, e.g., Lutovac & Kaasila, 2012; Pellikka et al., 2018; Uitto et al., 2018).

Memory can be defined as a particular act of recall or recollection that provides an image or impression of the experience that is remembered<sup>2</sup>. In other words, memory consists of *acts* of memorizing, and the *result* of those acts is the memorized experience. As the terms “image” and “impression” suggest, memories are not objective, nor are they full descriptions or neutral records of past experiences. They are subjective accounts of how people remember situations (Hyvärinen, 2014; Misztal, 2003). The subjectivity refers to both the way we remember things and the way we represent these memories. As claimed by Hyvärinen (2014), people are never mere registrars in situations that they have memories of. Put differently, our concerns, agendas, and interpretations of the importance of things shape and color our immediate experience. Memorizing is also a selective activity, and extreme cases—be them good or bad—tend to be the kind of memories people wish to share (Uitto, 2012; Uitto et al., 2018). In addition, the social and material contexts where memorizing takes place are influential in terms of the type of memories people create (Engel, 1999; Holland & Kensinger, 2010).

### ***Participants and Data Collection***

The participants were first-year preservice teachers of early childhood education ( $n = 21$ ) enrolled in university-based early childhood teacher education programs.<sup>3</sup> The participants were born between 1993 and 1996, thus being quite homogenous by age. Those born in 1996 were upper-secondary school graduates in spring of 2015. The longest time-period between graduating in upper-secondary school and beginning of their teacher studies was four years. The data consisted of twenty-one individual written responses and forty-nine pages in total. As the sample was dominated by female participants, and because matters of gender will not be addressed in this paper, all participants are referred to using a feminine pronoun in order to protect their anonymity. The data was gathered in spring 2016 at the beginning of a visual arts education course in which the first author was teacher.<sup>4</sup> The participants were asked to describe their relation to visual arts, their thoughts about it, and what it meant to them. They were also asked to write about their memories of visual arts from childhood and about an artist or artwork that they remembered and/or admired. The writing task was given to them during the first lesson of the course, and the participants had to complete it before the second

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/memory>

<sup>3</sup> Qualification is provided in bachelor programs lasting three years. Students also have the right to continue their education with a two-year long master’s program.

<sup>4</sup> The responsibilities were divided as follows: construction of theoretical framework: Author 1 and Author 2; data collection: Author 1; data analysis: Author 1 and Author 2; writing the paper: Author 1 and Author 2.

lesson. The writing task was not graded. Informed consent was asked for prior to giving the assignment. Even though the participants were asked to write about their memories of visual arts from a wider perspective, their writing mostly concerned their institutional visual arts education, which led us to place the analytical focus on these memories. This skew in the data is best explained by the way social and material contexts influence the act of memorizing (Engel, 1999; Holland & Kensinger, 2010). What we mean by this is that a visual arts education course provides a fruitful context for memories from visual arts education to arise.

Writing tasks have frequently been used as research data in preservice teacher research (e.g., Avgitidou, Pnevmatikos, & Likomitrou, 2013; Mertala, 2019; Miller & Shifflet, 2016) and autobiographical memory research (e.g., Uitto, 2011; Uitto et al., 2018). Like every other form of data collection, written assignments contain both pros and cons. Compared to interviews or other oral discussions, the benefits of written contributions are many: They allow the writer to produce data when they have the right mindset for said production; and, if the schedule for returning the texts is sufficiently long (in this case, the participants had three weeks to provide the assignment), the writer can work with the text in a process-oriented manner, which includes writing, reading/reflecting, and rewriting phases (Mertala, 2018). However, unlike research interviews, the use of written contributions does not allow the researcher to ask clarifying questions concerning the respondents' answers.

### *Analysis*

The analysis for this study followed the principles of an abductive content analysis. The abductive approach discards the belief that the researcher's observations and interpretations could be purely inductive and acknowledges that there is always a guiding theoretical thread included in the analytical process (Grönfors, 2011). Here, the main theoretical thread is the qualitative variation of visual arts education memories during different stages of institutional education (Garvis & Pendergast, 2010). Unlike a deductive analysis, following a theoretical thread does not mean that the theory is taken as given or that the goal of the analytical process is simply to test the theory. With an abductive analysis, the researcher moves between inductive and deductive reasoning to find new ways of theorizing the phenomenon (Suddaby, 2006).

The analysis began with the organizing phase: First, all of the assignments were read several times. Then, the aspects that referenced the participants' memories of visual arts education were highlighted and compiled into a single file. Following this, five new files were created for memories from different contexts: kindergarten, primary school, secondary school, upper-secondary school, and visual arts clubs. Then, positive and negative memories were searched and coded from these files. An additional code, "neutral," was given to the extracts where participants described visual arts education with no references as to whether they had enjoyed

or disliked the classes. Table 1 provides examples from this stage of analysis. More extracts are provided in the Findings section to improve the reliability and clarity of the study.

**Table 1**

*Codes and data examples*

<b>Code</b>	<b>Data example</b>
<b>Positive</b>	I have lots of positive memories from [my] primary school visual arts classes: We drew a lot and familiarized ourselves with different kinds of pens and paints (PST* D).
<b>Neutral</b>	I remember from [my] primary school era that we just drew a lot and did some crafting (PST N).
<b>Negative</b>	Perhaps the only really bad memory locates into [ <i>sic</i> ] secondary school visual arts education. Our teacher was constantly interfering to [ <i>sic</i> ] our work and you couldn't made them exactly the way you liked, but his/her handprints and ideas were always present in them (PST A).

\*PST: Preservice teacher

During the analysis, we read the data horizontally (reading all participants' data from different contexts) and vertically (reading individual participants' data in chronological order) various times. This approach was used because it allowed us to apply two different perspectives when reading the data. Reading the context-based files gave us an overview of which contexts and experiences were most influential; we could also recognize possible similarities between the experiences of different participants (horizontal reading). By simultaneously reading the full texts from the participating teachers (vertical reading), we also managed to apply a more holistic understanding of the individual preservice teachers' memorized experiences. Both of us first read all of the files independently and noted the most important themes. These notes were then compared and evaluated in joint discussions. Via this reflective and interpretative process, we formed three categories. These are presented as the findings of the study.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The data suggest that preservice generalist teachers' memories of visual arts education come mainly from educational contexts outside of early childhood education. In total, ten participants mentioned kindergarten in their writings, whereas nineteen participants included examples from primary, eighteen from secondary, and eighteen from upper-secondary school in their assignments. Experiences from non-formal visual arts education were discussed by seven participants. There are two possible explanations for the lack of memories from early childhood education. First, as early childhood education is not compulsory, not all preservice teachers were enrolled in early childhood education; thus, they had no experiences or



memories of it. Second, given that people usually begin to form permanent memories between their third and fourth birthday (at the earliest) (e.g., Jack & Hayne, 2007; Peterson, Warren & Short, 2011), it is likely that those who did attend early childhood education only had a few memories from this time.

Table 2 provides an overview of how the participants' memories were distributed on a positive/neutral/negative scale. As some participants reported both positive and negative memories from their particular educational phases, the number of memories is greater than the number of participants.

**Table 2**

*Distribution of memories on a positive–negative dimension*

	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Total
<b>Kindergarten</b>	7	3	-	10
<b>Primary school</b>	13	3	5	19
<b>Secondary school</b>	7	3	9	18
<b>Upper-secondary school</b>	7	7	4	18
<b>Visual arts clubs</b>	3	-	4	7

The distribution between positive and negative memories is roughly similar with Garvis and Pendergast's (2010) study on middle-year teachers' memories. Memories from early childhood and primary education were more often positive than neutral or negative, whereas negative memories were the most prominent category in memories from secondary school. In turn, memories from upper-secondary school were more positive than secondary school but not as positive as memories from primary school and early childhood education.

Our data suggests that there are various but not mutually exclusive reasons for the qualitative differences, changes, and shifts in the participants' memories. According to the data, the nature of the participants' memories of visual arts education is as a result of the negotiation between personal (i.e., their personal relationship with visual arts) and structural (i.e., changes in curricula) aspects. Teachers were presented as having important roles as mediators between these two domains, as both positive and negative memories often included personified descriptions of teachers. These themes are illustrated in Figure 1 and discussed in detail in their own subsections.

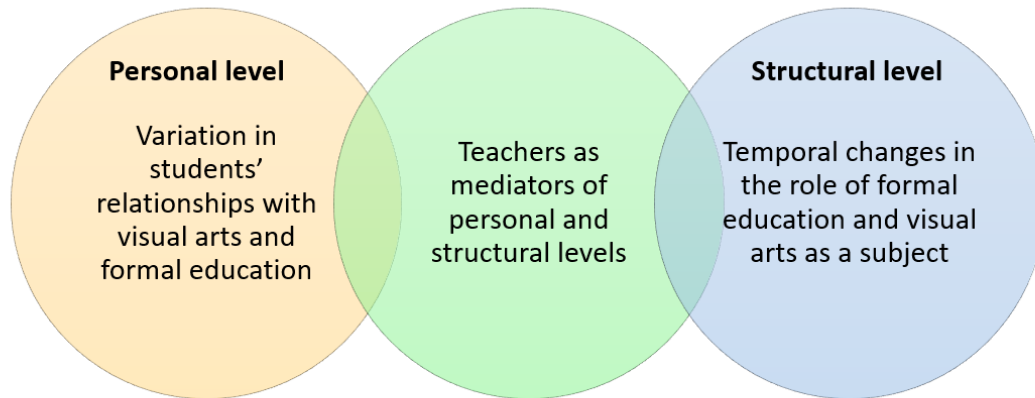


Figure 1. Key aspects shaping preservice teachers' memories of visual arts education

### ***Variation in Students's Relationships with Visual Arts and Formal Education***

The first key theme is the variation in students' relationships with visual arts and formal education. The data suggest that students enter visual arts classes with various expectations, motivations, or preconceptions. Often, the variation in the quality of the participants' memorized experiences of visual arts education depended on the participants' personal relationships with visual arts and how the content and practices of visual arts education were related. Even though no participants expressed a strong artist-teacher identity (Hall, 2010; Shreeve, 2009), many of them wrote that visual arts had been an important and enjoyable medium for them since—and especially in—early childhood.

Especially in primary school, drawing was very important for me, and I often dealt [with] things by drawing rather than talking or writing—I enjoyed very much creating something new, planning and drawing. Visual arts was the only school subject which I liked and in which I felt I was good. In secondary school, visual arts was a sure choice for an optional subject, and I took several shorter courses of it as well (PST A).

Others wrote that visual arts had never been a subject of interest for them.

<sup>5</sup> The term “student” is used when referring to children and adolescents participating in formal education. To put this in context, the participants of this study were preservice teachers who wrote about their memories as students.

The word visual arts brings to mind painting and drawing, of which I have never been very interested, because the results have never been very rewarding (PST O).

That being said, it needs to be emphasized that preservice teachers' subjective relationships with visual arts and visual arts education cannot be reduced into a binary "like/dislike" dimension. Put differently, even the participants who expressed an initial lack of motivation in visual arts as a form of self-expression expressed liking visual arts classes in primary school for their enjoyable tasks and in secondary school or upper-secondary school for their relaxed atmosphere. Accordingly, participants with an initial interest in visual arts expressed both positive and negative memories, depending on whether they believed that visual arts classes delivered what they wanted in terms of (positive) challenges and professional guidance. This theme is discussed in more detail in the following sections. These notions illustrate well how one's expectations shape how certain situations are experienced and memorized (Hyvärinen, 2014). The following extracts provide a descriptive example of how two PSTs had quite contrasting memories from similar visual arts education experiences.

From primary school, I remember one assignment from visual art classes which [*sic*] I enjoyed working with. We were supposed to draw from a model [picture] and scale it on a bigger piece of paper. We had to make a grid to the smaller picture and our own paper and use the grid to draw exactly the same picture as the original was. Somehow, it felt easier for me to not to use my own creativity, to be allowed to draw from a model. I feel that my weakness in visual art is creativity. If you are given freedom to do whatever, I cannot come up with any ideas (PST R).

The Teacher showed us an artwork of a famous artist, Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, and she told us all to draw the same. As a result, there was a pile of "similar" work, which we placed on the wall. I felt it was an extremely bad way to implement visual arts. Everyone must have thought they were unsuccessful/failed in [*sic*] some level when comparing their work to the original. There was no way any one of us could make exactly the same famous *Mona Lisa* (PST U).

In both extracts, the task the participants describe is similar: duplication of a model work with no room, or only scant room, for creativity. Both artworks are also justifiable according to the curriculum of basic education, as they contain elements of art history (the Renaissance, the *Mona Lisa*, and Leonardo Da Vinci) and use various techniques (i.e., scale drawing) (FNBoE, 2014b). However, the participants' reactions toward the task could hardly be more dissimilar. For PST R, copying was what made the work pleasant, whereas PST U disliked it because she felt that no one could create a decent copy of the model. It is also worth noticing that PST U

generalized her subjective experience as general rule: Because she felt disappointed, others must have felt the same way.

Another reason for the increased number of negative memories from secondary school could be the general lack of interest in institutional education that arises during this particular period. This phenomenon was present in our data, as some participants wrote that their motivation for school was not at its peak in secondary school, and they noted that this might have influenced their attitude toward visual arts:

The lessons passed chatting with friends. I was able to do all the work in time, but I did not feel I was getting anything special from visual arts. The lack of interest could have derived from the beginning of puberty. We couldn't care less . . . The world seemed very black and white through the eyes of a teenager (PST E).

In this extract, the participant describes how her interest in visual arts education faded during secondary school. However, in contrast to previous studies (Garvis & Pendergast, 2010), she does not criticize her teachers or the methods they used but admits that her indifferent stance toward visual arts education reflected her broader attitude toward school. As previously discussed, students' school motivation tends to be lowest during their time in secondary school (Silverman et al., 1999; National Institute for Health and Welfare, 2017). Thus, the decreased interest in visual arts education can be interpreted to be—partially, at least—a reflection of the general shift in attitude toward institutional education. That being said, it is evident that both the role and purpose of formal education and visual arts change as students move into secondary and upper-secondary education. These themes are discussed in more detail in the following section.

### ***Temporal Changes in the Role of Formal Education and Visual Arts as a Subject***

The second key theme to explore is the temporal changes in the role of institutional education and visual arts as a subject. This refers to three things: First, it refers to the way the nature of visual arts, as a subject, changes during the transition from early childhood and primary education to secondary school. Garvis and Pendergast (2010) have described this phenomenon as a shift from “enjoying the arts to studying the arts” (p.38). This theme was also present in our data. This, as Kallio (2005) notes, is largely due to the different goals and methods in the curricula. In our data, this shift took the form of a change from an integrative subject to a distinct one. For example, the positive memories from early childhood and primary education often contained descriptions of integrative and multidisciplinary projects and works in which visual arts were integrated with other subjects. Many of the participants cherished these experiences and memories. One participant wrote about a project of her early childhood education, where visual arts was combined with biology.

I remember from the kindergarten, how we searched colors in the yard from nature for our artwork. We gathered leaves and berries and etc. [*sic*], which we used to do our visual artwork later on. Everyone was allowed to collect objects they liked from the outside . . . they got their colors for their drawing. I thought it was a nice idea, because we learned the colors of fall at the same time, and we were allowed to work according to our own mind and use our creativity (PST U).

A horizontal and vertical reading of the data suggests that the participants had been socialized into certain types of visual arts education culture in early childhood and primary education. This meant that the transition to secondary school was a culture shock for them. Regardless of their personal relationship with visual arts, the vast majority of participants reported that they had liked the playful methods and relaxed atmosphere of early childhood and primary education. The more formal and somewhat academic approach to visual arts in secondary school was something many participants criticized. One participant wrote of how she enjoyed painting and drawing in upper-secondary school visual arts classes, but

as soon as our teacher approached and asked about my work, my good mood was gone. I could not explain nicely where my drawings rose from or why I did as I did. I felt distressed to make up any explanations and all kinds of scatty stuff just to make the teacher satisfied (PST E).

This comment is in line with Kallio's (2005) notions of how the demand for self-expression may seem superficial and be frustrating for students who do not consider visual arts a medium for expression. Similarly to the *Mona Lisa* situation in the previous section, here, the teacher was acting in accordance with the upper-secondary school curriculum, which requires self-assessment and self-expression via visual means (FNBoE, 2015). However, the participant's personal preferences and the way the teacher mediated the content of the curriculum did not match.

The second notable change is the shift from a compulsory subject to an optional subject in the transition from primary to secondary school. For those who did not choose visual arts as an optional subject, visual arts became marginalized.

In upper secondary school, I took only one compulsory course of visual arts, because I felt that I was stronger in music, even though I was little [*sic*] interested in choosing visual arts. But I had gathered already so many courses that I had to leave out visual arts (PST J).

Third, the notion of temporality illustrates how different stages of institutional education serve different purposes. While upper-secondary school acts as gate for university-level studies, not all subjects are treated equally when it comes to applying for further education. This was something the participants were aware of. Some of them wrote about being interested in visual arts but choosing more “academic” subjects as optional courses to improve their chances of obtaining a desired place in university (see also Garvis & Pendergast, 2010; Lummis et al., 2014):

In upper secondary/high school, I took only the compulsory course of visual arts. If I had not taken advanced math or chemistry, I would have had time to take more visual art courses. However, these subjects took the triumph because I thought I would need them more in the forthcoming applying to university (PST U).

In the Finnish context, upper-secondary school students are required to study seventy-five modules, forty-seven of which are compulsory. As described by PST U, if one chooses to study advanced math and advanced chemistry, it leaves little space for studying additional subjects. Additionally, the extract makes it clear that the participant preferred math and chemistry over visual arts for strategic reasons: If a student is not sure where they will apply after upper-secondary school, they can “play it safe” by studying advanced math, chemistry, and physics, because these subjects are valued in many fields (Pursiainen, 2017). Alongside changes in the implementation of the visual arts as a subject, the change from a compulsory to optional course, and the purpose the visual arts serves in different stages of education, another extremely important factor is the role of the teacher as mediator. This is examined in the following section.

### ***Teachers as Mediators of Personal and Structural Levels***

The third key theme is teachers as mediators of personal and structural levels. In the participants’ writings, teachers, teaching methods, and objectives were many times represented as being entangled, and the memory of an entangled experience was often verbalized as an experience that was orchestrated by the visual arts teacher. Thus, the memory, whether positive or negative, was represented many times as a memory of a specific teacher’s actions. This notion emphasizes the role of the teacher as the mediator. By “mediator,” we mean two things. First, even in cases where teachers act according to their personal preferences, they are still representatives of the structural level—namely, the institution, curriculum, and subject (see also Värri, 2004). Second, participants’ dislike of curricular changes or tasks was often expressed as criticism of the teachers, even though the changes and tasks were in line with curricular alignments.

People tend to best remember the teachers they considered the best or worst (Uitto, 2012; Uitto et al., 2018). In our data, individual teachers were notably visible, especially when the participants wrote about intense and emotional cases, whether positive or negative. This is illustrated in the following extract, in which one preservice teacher recounts her experiences from visual arts education in primary school:

I have good and bad memories of visual art lessons from school. Sometimes I have dug up some primary-school era work from storage and noticed that we have applied various different techniques, and looking at them, I can remember how much fun visual arts was in primary school. In primary school, I liked visual art lessons, except in [*sic*] the sixth grade, when we had a teacher who wished to modify our work as she wanted them [*sic*] to be/look like. For example, I remember one time we did papier-mâché gnomes; she advised everyone how they should be done. I remember that I had done a big nose for my gnome, and the teacher asked me to downsize it because gnomes weren't supposed to have such big noses (PST M).

The participant wrote that they had used multiple techniques in primary school visual arts classes and that she had enjoyed the classes. However, the only teacher she explicitly refers to is the one whom she felt was the worst. It is evident that the teacher demanded the students make changes to their work based on the teacher's aesthetic preferences and personal values. While having students make a papier-mâché gnome can be justified via curriculum guidelines that promote the use of various materials and techniques and integrate visual arts with various cultures and traditions (FNBoE, 2014b), no curriculum provides regulations for the size of a gnome's nose. As PST M's memorized experience was from primary school, it also highlights how the quality and changes in visual arts education can be more about the teacher than the transition from one stage of schooling to another. Negative memories of visual arts classes from the primary-school era also challenge the idea of childhood being a "golden age" (Garvis & Pendergast, 2010) for visual arts experiences.

A teacher's personality can also be a source of positive experiences and memories. One participant wrote how "every visual arts teacher from primary school to upper-secondary school has been supportive and given space for creating and developing own ideas" (PST C). However, her upper-secondary school teacher was "the best" because they were "very inspirational and funny, and therefore there were students just hanging around and talking even though they had not enrolled in the course" (PST C). Again, the only teacher who is given a personified space is the most extreme one: He or she was not only a good teacher but also highly likeable.

In general, despite the phase of education, teachers who were relaxed and allowed and supported self-expression were typically remembered in a more positive manner than teachers who favored model works or were notably critical when commenting or grading work. Some participants provided cherished descriptions of teachers who were encouraging and positive:

In secondary school, our teacher didn't want to hear our whining of failing or being unsuccessful in something, and there was a note on the wall which prohibited the use of the sentence "I can't." She thought that everyone had their strengths and everyone could do the required things in their own way. I liked her encouraging attitude, and the classes were fun when you understood that mocking yourself won't make things any easier for you (PST C).

However, some participants felt that if the teachers in the upper stages of schooling gave only positive feedback, the feedback meant nothing. In other words, they had internalized the changed nature of visual arts as a subject and they had some artistic aspirations, but they felt that the teacher was not acting in accordance with the established requirements:

In secondary school, my interest in visual arts began slowly to decrease. The reason for this could have been our teacher, who thought that every work was awesome. I felt that there were no standards (PST E).

As stated in the Finnish National Curriculum for Upper Secondary School, assessment should support the students' own relationship with visual arts and visual culture (FNBoE, 2015). Thus, it is possible that giving regular positive feedback can be a way in which a teacher approaches this task. In other words, the teacher is trying to encourage and embolden every student, regardless of their artistic abilities. However, for students with artistic aspirations and ambitions, such a practice may have been experienced and memorized as being unfair.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have examined twenty-one preservice generalist teachers' memories of visual arts education from different phases of their educational path. In line with previous research (Garvis & Pendergast, 2010; Lummis et al., 2014), early childhood was often remembered as a "golden age" of visual arts education, whereas memories from secondary and upper-secondary school were more negative. Our study, however, challenges the idea that these changes are only caused by the transitions between stages of schooling. According to our findings, the nature of memories of visual arts education is formed as a result of the negotiation between personal and structural aspects, and that teachers have an important mediating role between these two domains.



As interesting—and important—as what is found in the data is what is not found: Whilst the participants provided rich and detailed accounts of their visual arts classes, no discussion of or reflection on the goals and objectives of visual arts education was found in the data. In other words, the participating preservice teachers focused on the “hows” of visual arts education instead of the “whys” (see also Collannus, Kairavuori, & Rusanen, 2012). We find this notion problematic. The importance of the “why” questions cannot be overemphasized, since intentionality and goal orientation are key characteristics of institutional education (Salomaa & Mertala, 2019). The “hows” and “whys” of education should always be based on a clear understanding of its objectives, and these objectives should be visible and clear for the students as well. Next, we will discuss the implications of our findings for visual arts education and teacher education.

### ***Implications for Visual Arts Education***

As the participants did not refer to the objectives of visual arts education in their reported memories, the first suggestion would be that objectives (i.e., the “whys” of visual arts education) need to be more transparent for children and adolescents. By saying this, we are not claiming that the objectives were not discussed or presented to the participants at the time; it is more likely that they did not remember them. Thus, one of the challenges of visual arts education is to tackle how the abstract impressions used in curricular documents can be “translated” into a colloquial language that children and adolescents can understand and relate to.

From the viewpoint of the “hows,” it is important to notice that the preservice teachers participating in this study had positive memories of integrated arts projects from early childhood and primary education. The contrast with secondary and upper-secondary school was notable, as in these phases visual arts was a distinguished subject. Based on our findings, it is worth questioning whether the dichotomic division between arts and other academic subjects is a fruitful and pedagogically appropriate approach in secondary and upper-secondary school. It has been suggested that arts can be combined with science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) disciplines. This STEAM paradigm, in which the added “A” stands for the arts, emphasizes the importance of STEM education but argues that the arts can open up new ways of seeing, thinking, and learning (Ghanbari, 2015). There were a few individual examples of STEAM-related activities in secondary and upper-secondary school. One participant remembered a project involving math and visual arts:

Mostly I remember [of visual arts] from secondary school using the vanishing points in drawing, of which I liked very much. We drew houses using two vanishing points. I believe that the meaningfulness for [*sic*] this [method] was partly because there was an imminent motif, and by adjusting the details, you could make the

house look as you wanted it to and liked. In addition, I think that this had something to do with math and maybe geometry, when the work is drawn mostly using the help of a ruler. Math has always been clearly my strength, so maybe for that reason drawing with vanishing points was meaningful (PST H).

Integrated approaches are one way of getting rid of the oft-unnecessary borders between the arts and academic subjects. The recently reformed Finnish core curriculum provides fruitful ground for such integrative approaches. For example, the core curriculum for basic education demands every school conduct parts of its teaching in a multidisciplinary way, in which students' intellectual curiosity, experientiality, and creativity are supported and nurtured (FNBoE, 2014b). Such situations are highly valuable, as they provide specialized subject teachers with opportunities to try out new ideas and develop their teaching methods in a more integrative and comprehensive way.

### ***Implications for Teacher Education***

Our findings imply that preservice teachers' memories need to be considered in the initial stages of teacher education and that it is important for preservice teachers to engage in critical self-reflection in relation to their memories. We acknowledge that the cruciality of critical reflection has been discussed for decades (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 2001; Lortie, 1975; Schön, 1983, 1988). However, since concerns similar to the ones presented in this paper are common in contemporary teacher research conducted in various contexts (e.g., Benade, 2015; Russel, 2018), there is (still) a need for an ongoing debate on how the role of critical reflection could be improved and enhanced in initial and continuing teacher education.

What our paper adds to this discussion is that it emphasizes the importance of analyzing the intertwining relations between teachers' personal preferences, self-efficacy, and the particular phase of life (i.e., puberty) in shaping their memories. One participant wrote of how she, at the time, disliked her upper-secondary school teacher, who she described as being demanding and critical. However, she ends by noting that:

Looking backwards [*sic*], I find the instructions [the] teacher gave useful, and I recognize that I have learned a lot from upper-secondary school visual art courses. Maybe it is the reason that I did not feel to be [*sic*] good enough, and [the fact that] I felt my work [to be] childish in other people's eyes lowered my enthusiasm toward visual arts. Now in university, I hope to get lots of positive experiences from visual art classes so [that] I am able to pass forward [*sic*] the greatness of visual art for children (PST E).

Furthermore, as some of the participants generalized their subjective experiences, it is important that preservice teachers share their varying experiences and memories with each other so that they can approach visual arts from other perspectives. We would also like to emphasize the importance of asking and discussing the “why” questions of visual arts education in generalist teacher education. Reflection of the findings suggests that if preservice teachers lack an understanding of visual art objectives when entering teacher education—which, based on this study, is most likely the case—the training they receive should consider these aspects and provide preservice teachers with an understanding of these objectives. Only after this can their ability to implement them in their teaching be addressed with the more practice-oriented “what” and “how” questions. We propose this as a reform challenge for the contemporary teacher education curriculum. As the participants were specializing in early childhood education, the findings also have specific importance for early childhood teacher education. It is important to acknowledge that the participants’ memories largely came from the stages of education that came after their early childhood education era. This is a subject that needs to be explicitly addressed in early childhood teacher education by examining the differences and similarities of the essential “whys,” “hows,” and “whats” from different stages of institutional education.

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