

Participatory pedagogy and the professional identity of future art teachers

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Abstract: This article examines how participatory pedagogy shapes the professional identity of future art teachers. Although scholarship on teacher identity has shown that becoming a teacher is a dynamic, relational, and contextually mediated process, research on participatory pedagogy has more often emphasized engagement, innovation, and inclusion than professional becoming. This gap is especially important in art teacher education, where learning is inseparable from critique, interpretation, representation, and cultural mediation. The article argues that participatory pedagogy influences the professional identity of preservice art teachers not simply by increasing classroom activity, but by repositioning them as reflective, recognized, agentic, and ethically situated participants in educational practice. Drawing on literature in teacher identity, co-creation in higher education, arts-based reflection, and art teacher education, the discussion identifies four interrelated mechanisms through which this process occurs: reflective externalization, relational recognition, agentic authorship of practice, and ethical-cultural positioning. The article also argues that the formative potential of participation is never automatic. It depends on intentional facilitation, equitable structures of voice, and assessment models able to value collaborative and reflective learning. By bringing together these fields of scholarship, the article repositions professional identity formation as a central outcome of participatory pedagogy in art teacher education and offers a concise conceptual framework for future research and curriculum design.

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Keywords: participatory pedagogy, professional identity, art teacher education, co-creation, preservice teachers, arts-based reflection

Introduction

Professional identity is now widely understood as one of the central dimensions of teacher education because learning to teach cannot be reduced to the acquisition of techniques, knowledge, or competencies alone. To become a teacher is also to negotiate a sense of self in relation to practice, values, authority, and community. Research in teacher education has therefore repeatedly described professional identity as dynamic, relational, and continuously shaped through reflection, discourse, biography, and context rather than as a fixed professional attribute (Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop 2004; Beauchamp and Thomas 2009; Rodrigues and Mogarro 2019). This perspective matters because it shifts attention from training teachers only to perform professional tasks toward understanding teacher education as a formative environment in which future professionals interpret who they are becoming.

This formation-oriented view also helps explain why pedagogy itself must be treated as constitutive rather than merely instrumental. Preservice teachers do not encounter teacher education as neutral recipients of information. They interpret institutional expectations, respond to feedback, test assumptions, and develop habits of participation within concrete learning environments. The structure of those environments influences not only what students know about teaching but also what kinds of professional selves they are able to imagine and enact. Research on preservice identity development has shown that reflective activities, learning communities, contextual conditions, and relationships with mentors all shape how student teachers understand their place in the profession (Izadinia 2015; Rodrigues and Mogarro 2019). How future teachers are taught is therefore inseparable from who they may become.

Within higher education, participatory pedagogy has gained prominence as part of a broader move away from transmissive models of teaching toward dialogue, collaboration, agency, and shared responsibility. Yet participation should not be reduced to student activity in pre-designed tasks. Work on co-creation in higher education argues that meaningful participation involves forms of partnership, voice, and shared authorship that allow students to influence the conditions of learning rather than merely perform within them (Bovill

2020; Omland et al. 2025). This distinction is crucial. If participation is understood only as visible engagement, it risks becoming rhetorical; if it involves dialogue, positioning, and negotiated responsibility, it can become formative.

Despite the growth of scholarship on participatory learning, its relationship to professional identity remains underdeveloped, particularly in discipline-specific fields of teacher education. This is a significant omission because participatory pedagogies create conditions in which future teachers do more than absorb professional norms. They interpret, test, and internalize those norms through collaborative practice. When students co-design tasks, lead peer discussion, critique ideas, or participate in shaping criteria for quality, they are not only learning about teaching. They are being positioned as emerging pedagogical subjects. Participation can therefore function as a mechanism of professional becoming rather than only as a method of enhancing engagement.

This question becomes especially compelling in art teacher education. Future art teachers often develop at the intersection of multiple professional identities: artist, educator, facilitator, interpreter, and cultural mediator. Thornton (2011) describes this artist-teacher nexus as both enabling and tension-filled, since artistic practice and pedagogical responsibility do not always align neatly. At the same time, arts-based educational experiences have been shown to shape values, self-understandings, and perspectives that matter directly for emerging professional identity (Kenny, Finneran, and Mitchell 2015). Art teacher education is therefore a particularly revealing site for examining how pedagogy contributes to professional becoming.

The field also possesses features that intensify the identity-forming significance of participation. Creative and visual practices can make beliefs, tensions, aspirations, and professional self-images more visible than purely procedural reflection allows (McKay 2021). Drawing and visual representation can serve as tools through which students articulate how they imagine teacherhood and their place within it (Shin and Alpern 2024). Moreover, art education is deeply connected to questions of inclusion, interpretation, representation, and cultural difference. Research on visual arts education suggests that such experiences can strengthen preservice teachers' cultural identity and expand their responsiveness to diverse educational contexts (Garcia-Lazo et al. 2024). In this context, participatory pedagogy is not merely

learner-centred technique; it is also a way of organizing reflection, authorship, recognition, and ethical positioning.

This article argues that participatory pedagogy shapes the professional identity of future art teachers not simply by increasing engagement, but by repositioning preservice teachers as reflective, recognized, agentic, and ethically situated participants in pedagogical practice. To develop this argument, the article first brings together scholarship on professional identity, co-creation, and art teacher education. It then proposes four interrelated mechanisms through which participatory pedagogy becomes formative in this field: reflective externalization, relational recognition, agentic authorship of practice, and ethical-cultural positioning. The article concludes by considering the limits of participation and the implications of this framework for curriculum design in art teacher education.

Professional identity, participation, and art teacher education

Scholarship on teacher identity has consistently emphasized that professional identity is both personal and social. It involves beliefs, aspirations, emotions, prior experiences, and self-understandings, but it is also shaped through interaction with institutions, disciplinary traditions, mentors, peers, and broader professional discourses (Beauchamp and Thomas 2009). This is why professional identity is better understood as a process than as a possession. Teachers do not simply acquire identity at the moment of qualification; they continually negotiate what counts as legitimate practice, what values guide their work, and how they position themselves in relation to others. In preservice education this process is especially visible because students occupy a transitional position between learner and teacher. Their prior experiences of schooling, their expectations of teaching, and the institutional structures of teacher preparation all meet in a period of intensified interpretation and revision (Rodrigues and Mogarro 2019).

A formation-oriented understanding of identity also clarifies why pedagogical environment matters so profoundly. If professional identity develops through participation, reflection, and social recognition, then the design of teacher education cannot be treated as a neutral container for content. Programs shape identity not only through what they teach but also through how students are invited to act, speak, reflect, and assume responsibility. Izadinia (2015) shows that identity formation is influenced by contexts of reflection and by the relational environments in which future teachers encounter mentoring, challenge,

and support. Such findings suggest that educational design affects the degree to which preservice teachers can move from peripheral participation toward more confident professional self-understanding.

This point opens directly onto participatory pedagogy. In many higher education contexts, participation is still interpreted in thin terms, such as discussion frequency, activity levels, or involvement in interactive tasks. Yet the literature on co-creation argues for a thicker account. Bovill (2020) proposes that co-creation involves students sharing responsibility in the design or enactment of learning, while Omland et al. (2025) identify dialogue, positioning, agency, and voice as core concepts describing co-creational interactions. In this sense, participatory pedagogy is not just an instructional strategy that makes classrooms livelier. It is an arrangement of relationships in which students may become contributors to meaning-making, decision-making, and academic practice. That difference matters greatly for identity because it changes how learners are positioned within the educational process.

If students are treated only as consumers of learning experiences, their participation remains bounded by pre-established authority structures. If they are invited to co-interpret, co-design, and assume responsibility, they begin to experience themselves differently. The significance of this shift for teacher education is obvious: future teachers are learning within the very kinds of relational arrangements they may later reproduce, resist, or transform in their own classrooms. Participatory pedagogy can therefore provide not only a method for learning but also a lived model of what professional practice feels like when voice, agency, and shared responsibility are taken seriously.

The relevance of this argument intensifies in art teacher education because the field itself is organised around forms of practice that are already dialogic, interpretive, and often collaborative. Thornton (2011) argues that art teachers frequently negotiate a liberating yet unstable identity in which artistry and pedagogy overlap without collapsing into one another. This duality matters because preservice art teachers are not simply learning curricular delivery. They are also learning how to inhabit a professional role that draws on aesthetic judgement, creative process, critique, and educational care. The artist-teacher nexus makes professional identity more layered than in many other domains, and it also makes pedagogical experience especially significant as a site where these layers are negotiated.

Arts-based educational practices further deepen this process because they offer modes of reflection that can externalize professional selfhood. McKay (2021) shows that arts-based reflection can help preservice teachers express tensions, emotions, and aspirations that may remain less accessible in conventional written reflection. Similarly, Shin and Alpern (2024) demonstrate that drawing can provide insight into how students imagine teacher identity and understand their own position within educational becoming. These studies are important because they show that in teacher education, especially in the arts, reflection need not be only verbal or analytic. It may also be symbolic, visual, performative, and materially expressive. Such forms of expression allow identity work to become visible, discussable, and revisable.

Art teacher education also carries an especially strong cultural and ethical dimension. Art is bound up with representation, interpretation, plurality, and the politics of visibility. Future art teachers must therefore negotiate not only classroom technique but also questions of whose perspectives are acknowledged, how difference is mediated, and what kinds of cultural narratives are privileged in educational spaces. Garcia-Lazo et al. (2024) show that visual arts education can contribute to the strengthening of preservice teachers' cultural identity. This finding is significant because it suggests that identity formation in art education is not simply professional in a narrow occupational sense. It is also cultural, relational, and ethical. Becoming an art teacher includes learning how to mediate meaning, support expression, and respond to difference in ways that matter pedagogically and socially.

Taken together, these lines of research suggest that art teacher education is a distinctive site for examining participatory pedagogy for at least three reasons. First, it involves a layered professional identity structured by the artist-teacher nexus. Second, it relies on reflective and representational practices that can render identity work unusually visible. Third, it is entangled with cultural and ethical questions that make participation more than a classroom management technique. In such a field, participatory pedagogy may shape not only how students learn, but also how they understand professional voice, authorship, legitimacy, and responsibility. The next section develops this claim by identifying four mechanisms through which participatory pedagogy becomes formative in the preparation of future art teachers.

Four mechanisms of identity formation

Participatory pedagogy shapes professional identity because it changes what preservice teachers do, how they are positioned, and what kinds of self-understandings become possible within teacher education. The claim of this article is not that participation produces identity in a simple linear fashion. Rather, participatory environments create recurring conditions under which future art teachers can externalize beliefs, experience recognition, exercise authorship, and negotiate values in practice. These conditions are especially powerful in art teacher education because critique, interpretation, co-creation, and cultural dialogue are already integral to the field. Four mechanisms help clarify this formative process.

The first mechanism is reflective externalization. Professional identity is partly formed through reflection, but reflection becomes more powerful when assumptions and aspirations are made visible in a sharable form. In participatory environments, students do not only think privately about their learning; they articulate, test, and revise professional meanings in response to others. This process is intensified in art teacher education, where reflective work can take visual, dialogic, and performative forms. McKay (2021) shows that arts-based reflection enables preservice teachers to express complex emotional and professional experiences that may remain muted in conventional academic discourse. Shin and Alpern (2024) similarly demonstrate that drawing can reveal how students imagine teacher identity and negotiate the shift from student to teacher. Participatory pedagogy turns these expressive acts into collaborative reflection because they invite discussion, critique, and reinterpretation. A studio critique, for example, does more than assess a product; it gives preservice teachers a setting in which they can externalize their educational commitments, hear how others read them, and revise their understanding of what kind of teacher they are trying to become.

The second mechanism is relational recognition. Teacher identity is not formed solely through introspection. It develops through being seen, heard, responded to, and positioned as a legitimate participant in a professional community. Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) emphasize the importance of narrative, emotion, discourse, and context in identity formation, all of which are relational rather than purely internal. Participatory pedagogy matters because it creates opportunities for this recognition to occur in ordinary educational practice. When preservice teachers are invited to facilitate part of a seminar, contribute to the

interpretation of artworks, or help shape discussion criteria, they experience themselves not only as students completing tasks but as participants whose judgement carries weight. Such experiences are especially significant in art teacher education, where critique and interpretation depend on reciprocal acknowledgement. Recognition in this context is not merely praise; it is the experience of being treated as someone whose perspective can influence shared understanding. Over time, such positioning can strengthen a sense of professional legitimacy.

The third mechanism is agentic authorship of practice. A strong line of research on co-creation argues that participation becomes meaningful when students have some degree of influence over the design or direction of learning (Bovill 2020; Omland et al. 2025). Agency here does not require full equality of power or the abandonment of pedagogical structure. It requires that students can make consequential contributions to shared educational work. This matters for future teachers because professional identity is closely tied to the perception that one can act purposefully, make judgements, and assume responsibility for educational decisions. In art teacher education, such authorship may emerge when preservice teachers co-design a visual inquiry task, negotiate criteria for critique, or develop collaborative projects that connect artistic process with pedagogical aims. Kenny, Finneran, and Mitchell (2015) show that arts-based educational experiences can contribute to emerging teachers' values and self-understandings. Read through the lens of participatory pedagogy, this suggests that identity deepens when students do not merely study art education but help author educational meaning through it. Participation becomes professionally formative because it gives students a practical experience of pedagogical agency.

The fourth mechanism is ethical-cultural positioning. Professional identity always includes values. Future teachers develop assumptions about authority, inclusion, responsibility, difference, and the purposes of education, whether or not these assumptions are made explicit. Participatory pedagogy brings such assumptions into view because collaborative work requires decisions about whose voice is heard, how disagreement is handled, and what counts as legitimate knowledge. These are not only procedural questions; they are ethical ones. In art teacher education, the relevance of this mechanism is even more pronounced because art is deeply implicated in representation, cultural memory, and plurality. Garcia-Lazo et al. (2024) show that visual arts

education can strengthen preservice teachers' cultural identity, indicating that art teacher preparation shapes how future teachers understand themselves in relation to culture and practice. When participatory pedagogy is embedded in such contexts, preservice art teachers are invited to negotiate not only meaning but also responsibility: how to create inclusive interpretive spaces, how to respond to diverse aesthetic positions, and how to mediate difference without erasing it. In this way, participation helps form a professional identity that is not only creative and reflective, but also culturally responsive and ethically alert.

These four mechanisms are analytically distinct but practically intertwined. Reflective externalization often depends on relational recognition, because what students express becomes formative partly through how others respond. Recognition can strengthen agentic authorship, since being treated as a legitimate contributor increases the likelihood that students will take responsibility for educational action. Ethical-cultural positioning cuts across the other three, because reflection, recognition, and authorship all occur within value-laden relations shaped by inclusion, power, and difference. Taken together, the mechanisms suggest that participatory pedagogy shapes professional identity not by adding a motivational layer to existing instruction, but by reorganising the conditions under which future art teachers learn to see, voice, and inhabit professional selfhood.

The value of this framework is that it preserves complexity without dissolving into abstraction. It avoids reducing participatory pedagogy to a generic innovation and avoids reducing identity formation to private self-reflection. Instead, it shows that professional becoming occurs through structured relations of expression, response, contribution, and value negotiation. In art teacher education these relations are especially visible because the field already involves critique, creation, interpretation, and cultural mediation. Participatory pedagogy does not create these dimensions from nothing, but it can intensify and reorganise them so that they become more explicitly formative.

Limits and implications

The argument developed here should not be read as a romantic endorsement of participation. A consistent theme in co-creation research is that participation is not automatically inclusive, democratic, or transformative (Bovill 2020; Omland et al. 2025). Voice can be

distributed unequally, collaboration can reproduce hierarchy, and students may be invited into symbolic forms of involvement that do not genuinely alter the conditions of learning. This matters especially in teacher education, where preservice teachers are simultaneously vulnerable learners and emerging professionals. If participatory pedagogy is poorly designed, it may generate ambiguity rather than agency and performance rather than recognition. For that reason, facilitation is central. Teacher educators must structure participation so that voice is not monopolised by the most confident students and so that critique remains intellectually demanding without becoming socially exclusionary. This is particularly important in art teacher education, where public interpretation and aesthetic judgement can make participation feel personally exposing. Multiple modes of contribution, clear norms for dialogue, and careful scaffolding of co-creative tasks are therefore not optional additions; they are conditions for the formative potential of participation to be realised.

Assessment is equally important. If students are asked to collaborate, reflect, and co-author learning, but are judged only through conventional individual products, the pedagogical message becomes contradictory. Participatory pedagogy needs assessment models that can recognise reflective process, peer response, collaborative inquiry, and justified decision-making alongside individual achievement. In teacher education this alignment is essential because students learn what the institution values through assessment as much as through instruction.

These limits also point to practical implications. Teacher education programs should treat participatory pedagogy not as generic innovation but as part of professional formation. In art teacher education this means designing experiences in which critique, co-interpretation, collaborative planning, and visual reflection are intentionally connected to questions of professional voice, responsibility, and cultural responsiveness. The point is not to dissolve teacher authority, but to organise learning so that preservice art teachers can rehearse meaningful forms of participation they may later cultivate in their own classrooms.

Conclusion

Participatory pedagogy matters in art teacher education because it shapes more than engagement. It shapes the conditions under which future teachers learn to understand themselves as professionals.

Drawing together research on teacher identity, co-creation, arts-based reflection, and visual arts education, this article has argued that participatory pedagogy contributes to the professional identity of future art teachers through four interrelated mechanisms: reflective externalization, relational recognition, agentic authorship of practice, and ethical-cultural positioning. The significance of these mechanisms lies in the fact that they connect pedagogical form with professional becoming.

This argument is especially consequential in art teacher education, where the artist-teacher nexus, visual forms of reflection, and the cultural politics of representation make identity work particularly visible and complex. In this field, participation is not simply a learner-centred technique. It is a way of organising reflective expression, shared authorship, and ethical dialogue around educational practice. When thoughtfully designed, participatory pedagogy can help future art teachers develop professional selves grounded in responsibility, interpretive openness, and responsiveness to difference.

The article therefore proposes that professional identity formation should be treated as a central outcome of participatory pedagogy in art teacher education rather than as a secondary by-product. Future research may test, refine, or contest the four mechanisms proposed here, but the conceptual point remains: how future art teachers participate in learning shapes what kinds of teachers they are becoming.

AI Statement: Artificial intelligence tools were used only for limited language support during the preparation of this manuscript. Specifically, DeepL was used for the translation of individual words and short phrases, and Grammarly was used for spelling and orthographic checking. No AI tools were used for generating the scientific content, analysis, arguments, interpretations, or conclusions of the article. The authors take full responsibility for the content of the manuscript.

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