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Revealing Stories of Artistic Identity Through Fabric Bricolage

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ABSTRACT

This article presents and discusses the products of a creative workshop for artist/teachers which aimed to explore artistic identity through fabric bricolage, a medium unfamiliar to the participants. The account of the workshop and the artifacts created reveals the efficacy of a process that fostered reflection, honored complexity, included relational knowing, and affirmed the power of arts-based methods to reveal, connect, reframe, and transform. The article illustrates how individual acts of making, through the tactile, symbolic, and historically rich process of quilt-making, became a collective quilt of experience. The discussion points to the potential for further application in teacher education, professional development, and community arts contexts; any space where identity, creativity, and connection are valued. In a time when the arts continue to be marginalized in formal education and public discourse, creating spaces where creativity can be reawakened and meaning co-constructed is not just enriching, it is essential.

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Introduction

The extent to which visual arts permeate children's lives and learning is shaped by the adults who surround them and how visual arts are valued, experienced, and enacted in their educational settings. Teachers who have nurtured their artistic identities are more likely to design meaningful, responsive visual arts curricula and to engage with children's artistic processes with intentionality and insight (Denee et al., 2024; Probine, 2020, 2023). They are better equipped to respond to children's interests, model creative exploration, and construct arts experiences that are authentic, dynamic, and relational.

Many teachers, however, feel underprepared to support visual arts learning. This sits within a broader context of marginalization, where the arts are

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frequently undervalued in formal education, often sidelined in curricula, policy, and teacher training (Lindsay et al., 2025). As a result, teachers may experience low self-efficacy in this domain due to limited prior experience or unexamined memories from their own educational schooling (Denee et al., 2024; Probine, 2023). Internalized narratives about not being artistic, or lacking skill and knowledge, can limit teachers' engagement with the arts. These beliefs often lead to pedagogical approaches that are cautious or constrained (Lindsay, 2021). Strategies such as self-reflection, collaborative dialogue, and relational art-making experiences, facilitated in a supportive environment, have been shown to strengthen teachers' capacity and confidence in this area (Bergstrom, 2019; Campbell, 2017; Denee, 2022; Probine, 2023). These processes can support teachers in reimagining themselves as art-makers and to reframe their professional identities as artist/teachers (Denee et al., 2024). By *artist/teacher*, we refer to educators who not only engage in creative practice but who actively recognize both "artist" and "teacher" as core to their professional and personal identities. This is distinct from the term *teaching artist*, which more commonly refers to professional artists who teach in community or educational settings. The artist/teacher identity reflects a more integrated sense of self, in which artistic practice informs pedagogy and vice-versa, often cultivated through reflective processes that make space for both roles to coexist and intersect (Probine, 2023).

In this article, we, two teaching artists and researchers both working in initial teacher education, reflect on a workshop we co-facilitated at the International Teaching Artist Conference (ITAC) in Auckland, New Zealand, in 2024. Sarah brings a background in visual arts education in early childhood, with a focus on teacher identity and pedagogy, and Jayne brings expertise in quilt making both as a creative method and research practice. Together, we designed a workshop that used fabric bricolage as a strategy for teaching artists to reflect on their artistic and teaching identities and to explore the ways these two selves might intersect, inform one another, or converge within their professional practice. Workshop participants, who worked across a range of educational settings and age groups, were invited to reflect on formative experiences that shaped their journeys as artists and educators. These stories were rendered onto individual quilt squares using found fabrics and mixed media. In the second part of the workshop, participants contributed their pieces to form a collaborative "identity quilt," a visual tapestry of collective experience. This co-created artifact then served as a catalyst for group reflection and discussion.

After the session, each participant retained their square, and a digital image of the full quilt was shared with the group. Participants were invited to offer further written reflections, becoming co-researchers and writers in an ongoing meaning-making process. This article explores the workshop as both a professional learning experience and an arts-based research encounter. We examine

how collaborative making, storytelling, and material engagement can help educators access alternative forms of knowing, expand their artistic identities, and consider how these shifts might shape their teaching practice and ultimately, children's experiences of the visual arts.

Crucially, the workshop was also designed to be adaptable. Our intention was that participants, whether working with children, young adults, adult learners, or fellow artists, could draw from the experience to design and facilitate their own versions of the process across diverse educational and community settings. In this way, the work not only fostered individual reflection but opened a generative space for pedagogical experimentation and shared artistic inquiry.

The Formation and Evolution of Artistic Identity

Artistic identity refers to the evolving sense of oneself as a creative individual and is shaped by personal experiences, cultural context, and engagement in the arts. It reflects not only the skills and confidence an individual holds in relation to artistic practice, but also how they see themselves within creative processes and communities. As both Denee et al. (2024) and Probine (2023) argue, artistic identity is deeply relational and constructed through early and ongoing interactions with others. Particularly impactful are experiences of affirmation or, conversely, exclusion within arts learning environments.

Artistic identity often begins to form in early childhood, frequently influenced by key role models such as parents or teachers. While these early experiences are foundational, artistic identity continues to develop, erode, or be reimaged across the lifespan (Probine, 2023). Experiences throughout life, whether encouraging or diminishing, play a powerful role in shaping how individuals perceive their own artistic capacities. Denee et al. (2024) describe how both personal memories and educational settings can influence teachers' beliefs about the arts, with many participants recalling early discouragement from peers or educators that continued to limit their engagement well into adulthood. In contrast, experiences grounded in cultural traditions or supported by affirming mentors often laid the groundwork for more sustained artistic confidence. Rolling (2017) emphasizes that people begin to construct meaning and identity early in life and continue to do so throughout our experiences. Similarly, Veale (2000) and Probine (2020) highlight the formative impact of early life and family contexts in shaping artistic self-perception.

An evolving sense of artistic self has profound implications for teaching practice. Educators with a confident and engaged artistic identity are more likely to design and facilitate rich, responsive arts experiences. Teachers who see themselves as capable in the arts are more willing to model processes, take creative risks, and respond authentically to children's or students' expressions (Denee et al., 2024). Conversely, those with low self-efficacy may avoid teaching the arts altogether or adopt restrictive, product-focused approaches that stifle creativity

(Lindsay, 2017). Ultimately, the development of artistic identity shapes not only what educators teach, but how they teach and how they position themselves within the learning environment. In contexts where the arts are deprioritized or excluded from curricula, this positioning becomes even more fraught. Educators who lack support to engage confidently with the arts may internalize broader societal narratives that see creativity as peripheral to learning, further compounding a reluctance to explore or model artistic processes with children (Lindsay et al., 2025). Supporting teachers to (re)claim their artistic identities and to engage meaningfully with the arts becomes a vital strategy, not only for building confidence, but for nurturing pedagogies that are creative, relational, and responsive (Olsen, 2008; Probine, 2020).

Reconceptualizing and Re-Exploring Artist/Teacher Identity

For many educators, particularly those who experienced artistic discouragement in their formative years, the journey toward embracing an artist/teacher identity involves more than building skills; it requires re-authoring long-held narratives about creativity and artistic ability (Probine, 2022). Thankfully, artistic identity is not fixed; rather, it is fluid, relational, and shaped by the interplay between memory, social context, and ongoing experience (Bergstrom, 2019; Bruner, 1962; Kind, 2006). Reconceptualizing one's identity as an artist/teacher often begins with intentional acts of self-reflection. Both Denee et al. (2024) and Probine (2020, 2023) highlight the importance of creating opportunities for educators to revisit their personal histories with the arts in order to surface early experiences of affirmation or exclusion and to consider how these shape current beliefs and practices. Probine (2023) found that reflective journaling and storytelling provided student teachers with insight into how their past experiences informed their teaching philosophies, revealing previously unconscious connections between identity and pedagogy.

Hands-on engagement with arts practices also plays a crucial role in shifting educators' beliefs about their own creative capacities and artistic identities. Denee et al. (2024) argue that participating in practical workshops can support teachers to begin to reframe their understanding of art-making, not as a domain reserved for the highly skilled, but as a pleasurable process accessible to all. These experiences often lead to greater confidence and a willingness to model creative exploration with children and students. Hackett's (2020) study, which explored an arts-based professional development model for mentors, teachers, and community workers, further illustrates the power of creative participation in identity transformation. Through reflective storytelling and embodied activities, participants, many of whom did not initially identify as artists, described a renewed sense of voice, agency, and self-expression. This example of personal transformation highlights how artistic identity can be awakened or reframed through intentional, collaborative, and experiential engagement with the arts.

The reframing of artistic identity is deeply intertwined with theoretical belief systems. Educators who draw from constructivist and sociocultural perspectives are more likely to view both themselves and their learners as active co-constructors of knowledge. Meaning is shaped through interaction, reflection, and shared experience (Olsen, 2008; Probine, 2020; Veale, 2000). Such perspectives legitimize the idea that artistic identity is not fully formed from the outset. Instead, it can emerge and evolve through relational and experiential learning. Importantly, this view positions teachers not as experts who must demonstrate artistic perfection, but as fellow makers and meaning-seekers, an orientation that makes space for vulnerability, experimentation, and the gradual (re)claiming of an artistic self.

The re-conceptualization of artist/teacher identity is a complex, tangled process, which may involve a number of strategies including reflective storytelling, collaborative dialogue, practical exploration, and theoretical engagement (Denee et al., 2024; Probine, 2020, 2023). When brought together in intentional learning environments, these processes can disrupt internalized narratives of inadequacy and make space for more expansive, empowered understandings of self, as both artist and teacher (Hackett, 2020; Probine, 2023).

Methodology and Methods

The term *bricolage*, first introduced by Lévi-Strauss (1966), refers to creating using available materials. It has since been applied across diverse disciplines including entrepreneurship (Mateus & Sarkar, 2024), colonization (Knepper, 2006), and evaluation studies (Aston & Apgar, 2022). In artistic practice, bricolage invites improvisation with available or unfamiliar materials, an approach that encourages experimentation and creates space for new insights and ways of knowing to emerge. We drew on this concept both in the workshop design and our research methodology. We applied a practice-based, responsive approach where making, dialogue, and context were interwoven (Campbell, 2017).

Workshop Context and Structure

This workshop, Revealing Identity Networks Through Fabric Bricolage, was delivered as part of the 2024 International Teaching Artist Conference (ITAC) in Auckland, New Zealand. It was a 3-hour session, open to all attendees, with participants self-selecting based on interest. Ten participants joined the session, representing a range of educational and artistic backgrounds. The session was co-facilitated by the authors and invited participants to explore the interconnections between their artistic and teaching identities through storytelling, reflective dialogue, and fabric-based art-making. Participants were also invited to share post-workshop reflections and become coauthors in this article. These contributions were entirely voluntary and supported through a clear consent process.

Hackett (2020) argues that embodied learning and creative engagement are legitimate forms of inquiry capable of generating transformation, while Bergstrom (2019) highlights the value of combining strategies such as visual metaphor, reflective prompts, and collaborative dialogue to support identity development. Informed by these perspectives, we positioned making not only as artistic expression but as a generative research process.

Cohen-Cruz (2010) suggests that the act of making can foster deeper insight than observation alone, particularly when it invites personal reflection and meaning-making. In this spirit, we invited participants to explore their identities using fabric bricolage, engaging in tactile, reflective, and personal creation. By constructing their quilt squares, participants were encouraged to externalize aspects of their artistic and teaching identities that might otherwise remain unspoken. The act of making served as a generative form of data, later enriched through collective dialogue and reflective writing.

Data Collection

The workshop began with an explanation of its purpose: to explore participants' evolving identities as artists and educators through storytelling and fabric-based art-making. We introduced ourselves and shared our personal stories and artistic journeys, modeling the reflective and creative processes we were inviting participants to engage in. This included showing our own quilt squares and briefly describing the formative experiences they represented. We emphasized that there was no "right" way to participate and that the focus was on personal meaning-making rather than artistic skill. Participants were then invited to consider key moments in their journeys as teachers and artists, and to identify one or more stories they might render visually using the materials provided. This initial framing established the workshop as a shared, exploratory space and set a tone of openness, vulnerability, and curiosity.

Our approach to data collection was intentionally layered, reflective, and participatory. Data included quilt squares, a digital image of the assembled quilt, group discussion notes, and post-workshop written reflections. We treated these artifacts not as isolated outputs. Instead, we saw them as interconnected expressions of narrative, material engagement, and collaborative inquiry. Campbell (2017) describes teaching artistry as shared authorship and co-creation, a view that aligns with our framing of participants as co-researchers and co-writers in the meaning-making process. As facilitators, we also contributed our own quilt pieces and reflections, recognizing the importance of subjectivity in arts-based research. Sheridan (2018) and Hackett (2020) emphasize the value of lived experience and modeling vulnerability as essential to fostering authenticity and safety in such settings.

Storytelling, art-making, and reflection were not discrete activities, but overlapping and complementary modes of inquiry. Blei (2018) captures this dynamic

by noting that the roles of educator, researcher, and storyteller are closely intertwined, each engaged in the act of drawing meaning from lived experience in collaboration with others. This understanding informed our design of the workshop as a co-constructed research space, where knowledge emerged through interaction, reflection, and collective interpretation. In line with Bergstrom's (2019) framing of identity work, we sought to balance structure with openness, allowing space for both discomfort and support.

Data Analysis

Analysis was collaborative and reflective, grounded in principles of arts-based inquiry. Quilt squares, reflections, and discussion notes were treated as narrative data, offering insight into how identities were being explored and reimagined. Participants contributed directly to the analysis, with key themes emerging during the final discussion and added visually to the quilt itself. This visible, participatory approach reinforced the relational and co-constructed nature of the workshop (Campbell, 2017). As co-facilitators, we engaged in ongoing post-session reflection, discussing materials, methods, and moments of challenge or resonance. Our analysis remained inductive and thematic, shaped by repeated engagement with the data and with each other (Butina, 2015). This process supported a holistic reading of participants' experiences, attending closely to the emotional and relational dynamics through which identity work unfolded.

Consent

Participants were informed at the outset that the session would likely form part of a future publication, and that their contributions, verbal, visual and written, could be included as data with their consent. We explained that participation in any form was entirely voluntary, and that individuals could choose whether to have their quilt pieces photographed or to be contacted about contributing a post-workshop reflection. A contact list was provided for participants to indicate their preferences regarding follow-up communication and authorship. The final draft was shared for participant review prior to submission, ensuring consent was informed, ongoing, and aligned with the relational and participatory values of the workshop.

Findings

As participants engaged with the tactile, visual, and symbolic possibilities of fabric bricolage, a series of interconnected themes began to emerge across the quilt squares and accompanying reflections. These included: the enduring

influence of ancestry and intergenerational memory; the power of material engagement to surface forgotten or embodied knowledge; the freedom and vulnerability that arise when working with unfamiliar media; and the complex interplay of doubt, joy, and transformation within artistic identity. While each participant's story was deeply personal and distinct, these themes resonated across their narratives, pointing to the potential of arts-based processes to support identity exploration in rich and relational ways. In the following



Figure 1. Final bricolage quilt, Top row: left, Leah Kampkes; center, Chong,; right, Sarah Probine. 2nd row. Left, Pennie Howard; center, Jayne Jackson,; right, Jean Stewart 3rd row. Left, Priscille; center, Jayne Jackson; right, Megan Carter Bottom row. Left, Robyn Ewing; center, Jane Crosbie; right, Mihaela Enache

Transformation through Play and Unfamiliar Materials: Jane Crosbie



Jane entered the workshop firmly as a painter with no prior experience in quilting. Initially uncertain, she found herself unexpectedly captivated by the vibrant colors, textures, and intuitive possibilities of fabric bricolage. This tactile and improvisational process offered a liberating alternative to her usual art-making, disrupting established habits and inviting a playful reimagining of her creative identity. Her reflection reveals how working with unfamiliar materials can catalyze artistic risk-taking, joy, and transformation.

Today I made my very first art quilt, in an hour. I have never made a quilt before in my life. I'm a painter, not a quilter. But the moment I saw the massive table covered in thousands of pieces of gorgeous colored fabric, I felt like I'd died and gone to heaven. I just started juxtaposing fabric together, no rhyme or reason, no storytelling, no great art message. If I liked it, I grabbed it. Real simple.

Despite initial hesitation about sewing, Jane's confidence grew quickly. By the end of the workshop, she described herself as "addicted" to quilting, and envisioned it as a serious new dimension of her artistic practice.

I was petrified of sewing a quilt. But once I started, my fear dissolved in five seconds flat, ... I can now see myself becoming a quilter, an idea that was inconceivable before this workshop.

Intergenerational Identity and Material Memory: Mihaela Enache

Mihaela's quilt square offers a richly layered meditation on ancestry, place, and the shaping of teacher identity through inherited values and cultural memory. Her process began with exploring the fabric, and this tactile engagement evoked recollections of family, place, and language, all of which inform her pedagogical practice. Her narrative, reveals how the act of making can invite an intricate interweaving of lived experience, pedagogical values, and artistic expression.



The making of my square started with rummaging through fabric remnants and rummaging through remnants of memory. I found an image of a cottage that looked like the cottage of my paternal grandparents in the village of Căscioarele (Tiny Houses), Romania. The landmarks of this village are the forest of Codrii Vlăsiei and the river Argeș. These landmarks; the forest, the river, and the cottage are etched on my identity. I placed small animals, birds, and trees close to the cottage. They were the living entities my grandmother Tudora knew so well. The forest was her paradise. My maternal grandfather Ionel's tailoring tools occupy an important place on my square. The flowers at the top of the square represent my mother Margareta's love of nature and her determination to succeed in life through studying (Enache, 2019), both traits passed on to me. In the middle of the square there is the shape of a bird made with Latin words. Latin was a compulsory subject in school in Romania. I learned by heart quotes and proverbs including, "*Verba volant, scripta manent*" (spoken words fly away, written words remain). Throughout my life, written words and writing have played a significant role in the shaping of my teacher/researcher identity. Teaching from the heart is a core part of my teacher identity. It implies feelings, embodiment, moral values, and the concept of Māori ako, whereby the teacher is a learner, and the learner is a teacher. The different pieces of fabric wove together my memories of places, people, and things, in a time-space where past, present and future, here and there amalgamate and define who I am as a teacher.

Early Wonder and the Artist's Eye: Jean Stewart



Jean's quilt square emerged from a vivid childhood memory, an experience of solitude and awe in the natural world that left a lasting impression on her as an artist. Her story captured an early moment of attentiveness and emotional

resonance that continued to echo through her creative work... Rather than developing through formal instruction, Jean's artistic identity formed around a felt need to witness, hold, and express the extraordinary. Her reflection reminds us that identity is often seeded in early moments of wonder, and sustained through a lifelong desire to capture what is felt more than seen.

When I was young my Mum would take me and my sister on all sorts of adventures tramping for days. She was a solo mum so it was pretty amazing really that she did all that. This one time we were on a tramp somewhere in the South Island and there were all these wild horses around. We had reached the hut and it was chill out time at the end of the day. I think we were the only people in the hut. I went and climbed up a tree to be even more alone and a pack of horses came and stood underneath me. I remember the stallion looking up straight at me with his head on the side and his wild eye all black and glassy and electric. I think that's why I'm drawn to painting as a kind of record of wonder or of living.

Voice, Vulnerability, and the Recursive Self: Jayne Jackson

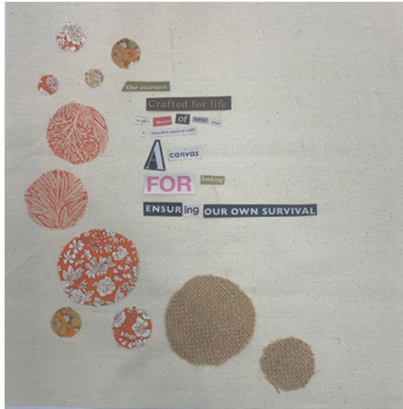


As a co-facilitator, Jayne contributed to the workshop both as a guide and as a participant. Her reflection traced a personal and professional journey of voice-finding, through fabric, through practice, and through the gradual convergence of creative and scholarly identities. Her narrative highlights how the act of making, especially in the presence of others, can become a recursive process, one of ongoing negotiation between form and feeling, doubt and resolve, and the shifting relationship between maker and researcher.

My first piece, made as an exemplar for the workshop, reflects my journey as a quilt maker, which was one of finding my voice within the media, initially as a maker and latterly as a researcher. It took some time and practice to develop my style and skills to match my making aims just as it has taken time and practice to apply research skills to this field. My second piece was made during the workshop. I had been considering ideas about self portraiture in fabric for some time and was inspired by the image found in a newspaper. I used fabric to feminize the portrait and to capture my purple hair. The words were found in newspapers where I aimed to represent the concerns and joys of making. During the

movement from concept to object, every stage of making needs courage and vision and is dogged by uncertainty and doubt.

Crafting Meaning, Crafting Self: Material Memory and Found Poetry: Sarah Probine



As a co-facilitator, Sarah chose to respond to the workshop and the materials in a new way. Having already created a quilt square prior to the session, she turned to found poetry, allowing fabric, newspaper, and tactile engagement to guide her. Her reflection explored how marginalized forms of making, such as crafting and stitching, can become sites of meaning-making, cultural memory, and identity reclamation:

“I created a piece of found poetry, a new form of expression for me. Having already made a quilt square prior to the workshop, I chose to try something unfamiliar. Surrounded by mounds of colorful fabric and old newspapers, I let the materials guide me. As I selected textures and phrases, I began thinking about history and the makers who came before me. Normally, I gravitate toward visual arts like drawing and painting, but quilting prompted me to consider forms often located at the margins of art; crafting, stitching, piecing fabric together, acts rooted in care, necessity, and survival. Holding fabric and contemplating its past uses invited a different kind of reflection. Identity, I realized, is shaped not in isolation but through what we inherit, repurpose, and pass on. My poem emerged from this space of remembering and imagining, “Our ancestors crafted for life, to tell stories of feelings past. A beautiful piece of cloth, a canvas for looking... ensuring our own survival.” These words speak to the enduring need to create as a way of processing and continuing. In exploring found poetry, I accessed another layer of my artist/teacher identity—crafting meaning and self. This reminded me that identity work is less about mastery and more about making space for memory, material, and transformation.

Discussion

Revisiting Artistic Identity: Remembering, Reconstructing, and Reclaiming Artistry

Artistic identity, as explored in this article, is not a fixed trait but a fluid and relational construct emerging through ongoing experience, memory, and material engagement (Bergstrom, 2019; Denee et al., 2024; Probine, 2023). The quilt workshop created a space in which participants could reenter formative stories, surface tacit knowledge, and reimagine themselves as both artists and educators. For some, this process reaffirmed long-standing creative identities; for others, it prompted a shift in how they understood or expressed their artistry. What emerged across the reflections was a sense that artistic identity is not only remembered but made and remade through the act of creation itself.

The fact that these insights emerged among a group of experienced artist-teachers only heightens the potential significance of this approach. If such a process proved meaningful for participants already working within creative education, we suggest this may be even more impactful for those who do not currently identify as artists or who have internalized narratives of artistic inadequacy. In this sense, workshops like this one offer both a methodology and a pedagogy, a way to support artistic identity development through relational, embodied, and reflective practice.

Pedagogical Conditions for Such Identity Work

We found several features of the workshop design that contributed to its impact. First, participants were invited to engage with materials before articulating a concept. This process-centered approach lowered the threshold for participation and foregrounded sensory exploration. The use of unfamiliar materials, particularly for those more accustomed to drawing, painting, or writing, also offered a sense of permission. Fabric and thread carried fewer preconceptions or skill-based expectations. This created space for experimentation, play, and self-expression without fear of aesthetic judgment. Second, as facilitators, we aimed to model vulnerability and creativity by sharing our own stories first, setting a tone of relational openness (Hackett, 2020; Sheridan, 2018). Sheridan highlights the power of personal truth-telling in pedagogical practice, noting that vulnerability can serve as a bridge to deeper self-inquiry and mutual connection. Third, the structure of the workshop, moving from memory to making to shared reflection, supported layered meaning-making and the emergence of collective insight. Finally, the absence of assessment or critique reinforced this safe space, encouraging participants to take risks, embrace imperfection, and explore identity through the act of making.

The workshop not only fostered reflection but modeled a way of teaching and learning that honors complexity, process, and relational knowing. These conditions align closely with Campbell's (2017) assertion that teaching artistry involves not only technical or aesthetic expertise but also emotional intelligence and the ability to read and respond to group dynamics. She emphasizes the importance of scaffolded reflection when working with emotionally resonant material, particularly in settings where identity is being explored. Our emphasis on intentional, guided reflection and participant-led dialogue was designed with these considerations in mind. Together, these elements supported a pedagogy of presence, care, and agency. Participants were positioned not simply as learners or contributors, but as co-researchers and co-constructors of meaning (Blei, 2018; Campbell, 2017).

Broader Implications for Teaching Artists

The reflective and relational practices facilitated through this workshop resonate strongly with the principles of teaching artistry, particularly the emphasis on co-constructing knowledge through arts practice and creating spaces for transformation (Campbell, 2017). For teaching artists navigating diverse educational and community settings, this model offers a framework for integrating identity exploration into their pedagogy. By engaging with unfamiliar materials, reflecting on their dual roles, and coauthoring meaning with others, teaching artists can deepen their understanding of their practice and foster more authentic, responsive connections with learners (Hackett, 2020). As such, the process of fabric bricolage and collective storytelling may serve not only as a site of identity development but also as a professional learning tool that supports sustainable and reflexive teaching artist praxis (Campbell, 2017; Hackett, 2020).

Making Meaning—Making Quilts

The use of quilt-making as both method and metaphor was central to the reflective depth of the workshop. Quilts are inherently layered objects: assembled from fragments, stitched into coherence, and embedded with personal and collective memory and meaning. Workshop participants were familiar with textiles in everyday life but unfamiliar with their use as a creative media. This provided both affordances (freedom to create without expectation, encouraging experimentation) and constraints (lack of experience with fabric manipulation). Participants used texture, color, pattern, and composition to communicate memory, feeling, and transformation, allowing meaning to emerge through tactile engagement and visual metaphor.

Quilts have a significant history as objects that communicate meaning (Bohde, 2005; Futter-Puati & Maua-Hodges, 2019; Jackson, 2023). The squares made in

our workshop continued this tradition. Quilt making invites symbolization and abstraction, offering participants a flexible visual language through which to render stories that may be difficult to verbalize. The making and discussion phases of the workshop provided opportunities for the embedded meanings to be understood in the contexts of production, viewing, and materiality (Aiello, 2006). Symbolism was evident in many of the quilt squares and makers frequently used the word ‘represent’ in their written and verbal discussions of the items they made.

Concluding Thoughts

This workshop reaffirmed that artistic identity is not a fixed characteristic, but a lived and evolving construct, shaped through activity, memory, material, community, and reflection (Bergstrom, 2019; Bruner, 1962; Kind, 2006). Through fabric bricolage, storytelling, and shared inquiry, participants were invited to revisit formative experiences and (re)claim or (re)explore their identities as artist/teachers. For many, the tactile and symbolic act of quilt-making surfaced stories and insights that may have remained dormant or inarticulate through more conventional methods. These individual acts of making, when brought together, became a collective tapestry of experience and affirmed the power of arts-based methods to reveal, connect, and transform.

The workshop model we present, layered, reflexive, and co-constructed, offered more than a one-off learning event. It became a relational methodology, where participants were not only quilt makers but also co-researchers and coauthors of meaning. As Blei (2018) suggests, meaningful art often begins with personal story, and the teaching artist plays a vital role in facilitating such processes. Our work underscores the potential of art-making as inquiry, particularly when facilitated in ways that center vulnerability, participation, and the shared crafting of knowledge.

Importantly, this model is adaptable to other settings. The affordances of bricolage, particularly its use of accessible, found, and unfamiliar materials, allow for inclusive and low-pressure participation. This design may hold particular value for those who do not (yet) identify as artists or who carry doubt about their creative capacities. We see clear potential for further application in teacher education, professional development, and community arts contexts, any space where identity, creativity, and connection are valued. In a time when the arts continue to be marginalized in formal education and public discourse, creating spaces where creativity can be reawakened and meaning co-constructed is not just enriching, it is essential. This marginalization has had profound impacts on educators’ self-concept and practice (Lindsay et al., 2025). Workshops like ours serve as small acts of resistance, reasserting the centrality of creative expression in teaching, learning, and professional identity. For us, as facilitators who inhabit

the space between artist, educator, and researcher, this process has also illuminated new ways of approaching our own teaching artistry. It reaffirmed the importance of relational esthetics, collaborative inquiry, and material exploration in shaping not only how we teach, but how we continue to grow as practitioners. Workshops such as this offer more than strategies for professional or artistic growth; they create opportunities for generative dialogue, embodied reflection, and the building of creative communities where all learners can take risks, make meaning, and imagine new ways of being.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on Contributors

Dr. Sarah Probine is a senior lecturer at the University of Auckland whose research focuses on early childhood education, with a particular interest in the role of the arts in young children's learning and development. Her work explores how creative, multimodal experiences support meaning-making, wellbeing, and equitable educational practice.

Dr. Jayne Jackson began her career as a primary teacher and currently works as a Senior Lecturer at Manukau Institute of Technology, teaching in the area of Initial Teacher Education. She has varied research interests focussing on wellbeing including quilt making, reading for pleasure and Healthy Active Learning. Quilt making is a personal passion, recently enhanced by research into this discipline.

Dr. Mihaela Enache's teaching career in early childhood, primary and tertiary settings spans over more than 3 decades, both locally and internationally. Mihaela's research explores topics like teacher identity, traditional and indigenous arts and crafts, migration, communism, interculturality, community work and innovative research designs through the use of creative methodologies.

Robyn Ewing is Professor Emerita and a co-director of the CREATE Centre at the university of Sydney. Robyn is a leading scholar in drama education, and co-developer of the nationally acclaimed School Drama™ program. She is also a passionate advocate for the role of all the arts in transforming education, supporting creativity, critical thinking, and social equity across the curriculum.

Jane Crosbie is a modern impressionist painter who has exhibited internationally. Her bold multilayered originals in oils, acrylics and mixed media are alive with movement and texture created by palette knives. Now she has fallen in love with the innovation and versatility of art quilts - painting with fabric. She runs community art events.

Jean Stewart is a painter and arts educator based at Corban Estate Arts Centre in Waitākere, Auckland, with a master's in design and Painting. Her practice explores memory, storytelling, and community connection through visual art, extending beyond the studio into public and participatory projects.

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