



# What young children say about art: A comparative study

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## ABSTRACT

Given the opportunities, young children can be prolific in their productions of drawings and paintings. In the study reported in this paper, we had two questions about this. Why do young children draw and paint? And, what does this prolific activity do? We consider that particular ways of seeing art position children, and children use their artistic activities to position themselves, producing their identities. We interviewed a group of children in Hong Kong, aged between 4 and 5 years, (n=27), and a group of children in Brisbane, Australia, who were of similar ages (n=15). The cross-cultural dimension added another dimension to our thinking and conversations around art and young children.

## Introduction

Given the opportunities, young children can be prolific in their productions of drawings and paintings. In the study reported in this paper, we had two questions about this. Why do young children draw and paint? And, what does this prolific activity do? For answers to our first question we asked the children, and drew on phenomenography (Marton, 1981) for design and methods, to generate, sort and reduce the data. The second question was prompted by Sverre Knudsen's (2008) study of young children's early musical activities, and draws on Foucault's (1988) technologies of the self. We were interested, not so much in what kind of art the children were doing but, rather, how art works — how particular constitutions of art position children, and the ways in which children use their artistic activities to position themselves, and produce their identities and sense of self (Foucault, 1988). There is much to be learned about children through studying their art, and close observations, reflections and findings can all contribute rich information for developing and improving approaches to arts education for young children. But what do the children themselves make of these experiences? And what do these experiences make of the children?

In this paper, we provide a partial account of a small cross-cultural research study, designed as an inquiry into what young children say about art, how and what they learn about and through art, and why they do it. The project involved interviewing children of similar ages in two cultures: one group of children in a Hong Kong preschool (n=27), and one group of children in their Prep year in Queensland, Australia (n=15). We were curious to see what the children had to say, and then to consider how their views compared with those who write about their art, appreciate it, and those who teach them.

To romanticize children's 'voice' and make ultimate 'truth claims' (Fraser, 1995) is as erroneous as it is to ignore what young children have to say. In this paper, we acknowledge a number of the issues around doing research with and on children, and make no universal claims about what we learned through our work with these particular children. Rather, we present our discussion and ideas here as provocations for further consideration, for both teachers and researchers.

## **Background**

Artworks can attract large sums of money in auction rooms while, simultaneously, art can be dismissed as unimportant and valueless (Berger et al., 1972). The arts have traditionally enjoyed an established place in early years settings, to the point that this has become taken-for-granted. Nevertheless, current threats from the push down of the so called 'academic outcomes' mean that, once again, advocates for arts education need to make strong cases for the arts in the curriculum. Efforts to define 'proper' ways of teaching art draw on layers of beliefs and practices, some that have endured across time, some that vary across cultures, and some that disappear to be replaced by newer thoughts (see McArdle and Piscitelli, 2002). Two key arguments have resonated over many years — art-for-art's-sake, and art-for-life's-sake (Efland, 1995; Feldman, 1996; Leeds, 1989). The first insists that the arts are a part of what makes us human, a powerful means of communication, and something that can lift us to a higher plane (Wright, 2003). At the same time, arts educators have long appreciated the links between art and learning (see Bresler and Thompson, 2002; Dewey, 1934; Eisner, 1982; 2002; Heath, 2001 Thompson, 1995), and place art at the core of the curriculum. But art remains a contested site, historically, in the wider society, and in schools.

One way of understanding the ambivalences around art and art education is to consider how approaches to teaching art have been discursively produced, at the site where discourses of the child, art and pedagogy come together, sometimes comfortably, sometimes colliding and competing (see McArdle & McWilliam, 2005). For instance, children's drawings and paintings are traditionally displayed in many early childhood settings around the world. But why? Adults respond variously to children's artworks. Many people consider them charming, dynamic, and even poetic. The modernist artists like Klee, Picasso and Kandinsky looked to young children's artistic efforts for a new way of seeing and thinking about their own aesthetic and artistry (Wright, 2003). At the same time, in the early twentieth century, Maria Montessori dismissed them as meaningless scribbles, and directed that young children should be taught about aesthetics and appreciation of the 'masters'. (Montessori, 1965) . For some, children's drawings and paintings are merely a curiosity, and for others they are

a 'window to the soul' (Hubbard, 1994). Young children's art has become commodified, used to sell anything from back- to- school products, to coffee mugs and calendars. Still others celebrate them as artworks, collecting them, studying them, framing them, and even sometimes hanging them in galleries (for example, at the 6th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT6), GoMA, Queensland, 2010). Some say they are displayed in schools in order to give schools a certain "look" (Bresler, 1993), and are read as evidence of happy, healthy, busy children (Tyler, 1993). Teachers work to find ways to make sense of the various discourses of the child, art and pedagogy.

We are drawn to the work of artists to learn about ways of seeing — histories, cultures, societies and being human. The arts are a powerful form of communication, especially when words are either inadequate or unavailable (Wright, 2003). Young children's drawings and paintings then prove a rich source of data, when the more traditional, word-centric research methods prove inappropriate (McWilliam et al., 2009). Researchers have collected and examined children's art as a means to construct various taxonomies and to learn more about children (see for example, Derham, 1961; Golomb, 2003; Kellogg, 1969).

Our collaboration on the study reported in this paper grew from a shared interest in what children make of the arts activities they experience. The idea of accessing children's voices around the arts is not new. Educators in Reggio Emilia have almost taken the documentation of children's voices to an artform itself (see Project Zero & Reggio Children, 2001; Reggio Tutta: A Guide to the City by the Children, 2000). Others too have included children's voices in their close examinations of process as well as product, in their efforts to learn about young children's artistic activities (see for example, Brooks, 2009; Matthews, 2003; Wright, 2007). Galleries and museums have also embraced the notion of children as informants for their research, developing methods for accessing the views of children on their experiences in the museums (see Danko-McGhee, 2004; Piscitelli, 2001; Weier, 2004). Knight's (2008) collaborative drawing project has enabled her to work and talk alongside children as they make art together. And Prowse (2009) is introducing digital technologies as a further means for making a space for children to show us what they know.

The limitations of 'giving voice' are discussed elsewhere (see Lather, 2009), and the issues of what constitutes 'truth' and authenticity are confounded when working with young children (see MacNaughton, 2003). In earlier studies, we have both been intrigued by the contradictions and contingencies in discursive constructions of art education (see McArdle, 2001; Wong, 2007). The cross-cultural aspect of our collaboration adds another dimension to our shared conversations and inquiries. The opportunity to work with children in Hong Kong and Brisbane, Australia, was prompted by the earlier work of Kindler and her research team (Kindler et al., 1998; 2000), who conducted a series of cross-cultural studies involving young children from Canada, France and Taiwan. In our study, consistent with phenomenographic methodology, the conversations were semi-structured, and somewhat open-ended.

## **The Study**

This study was an inquiry into what children say about their experiences of arts

education in early childhood. We worked with two intact groups of children of similar age. There were 27 children (aged four to five years) who attended a Hong Kong preschool, and 15 children of similar age, who were enrolled in the Prep year in Brisbane, Australia. Both settings could be said to be typical or representative in their communities, as far as curriculum, resources, and teacher qualifications. Typicality though does not suggest a representative of any uniform or national approach to arts education, as the variables, particularly in Australia, can make even classrooms side by side in the same building take on very different aspects.

The Hong Kong preschool was part of a service that provided a full day program for children aged two to six years. The curriculum is built on a thematic approach to curriculum planning. Each theme lasted for a month, and normally culminated in a 'project'. Typically, the teachers use a didactic approach, designing two to three special theme-related art activities for the children to complete. These are usually product-oriented, with the children required to follow directions and instructions, and finish with a product, as modeled by the teacher. The special artwork is introduced to the children through small group teaching. All of the children were required to participate in this session, and then complete the task at their own pace and in their own choice of time. Children could work in the art corner which was set out as a free-choice activity on a daily basis. Teachers regularly refilled the art corner with new materials or items, sometimes sat at the art corner, and encouraged children who had not chosen art for some time to do some art activity.

The Prep year in Brisbane is the year immediately before formal schooling, and is non-compulsory, but with a high percentage of the population attending. This Prep was attached to a Primary school. Children participate in a full day program. The children had recently visited the State Art Gallery, and the teacher had curated an exhibition of the children's artworks in the Prep room, inviting families and the wider school community. The teacher used a version of what Wright terms the Guided Learning Approach (see Wright, 2003), combining direct teaching of skills and techniques (drawing and painting), art appreciation (discussing artworks), and developing discipline knowledge (line, shape, colour). The interviews were conducted at a time when children are free to choose from a number of activities regularly available to them at 'indoor time'.

## **The conversations/interviews**

The same researcher conducted all the interviews in Hong Kong, and a different researcher conducted all the interviews in Australia. The conversations/ interviews were conducted according to phenomenographic methods, in the children's preschool settings, as the children were engaged in 'free choice' activities. The researcher sat in the art area, and invited individual children to talk with her about their art, including the reasons for doing it. The interviews usually started with "What kind of art are you doing today?", then "How do you learn to make art?", then "Why are you making art?" Children who did not visit the art area were interviewed in other activity areas. The researcher had only to provide children with a few questions that prompted their responses. If children were reluctant to join in the conversation, extra prompting questions included 'Can you tell me more?', 'What do you think about what [Yannie]

is saying?', 'Do you agree with him? Why?'. The researcher continued interviewing until it appeared that the children had nothing more to add on the subject of art. All interviews in Hong Kong were audio and video taped. In Australia, they were audio taped only. While the videotaping in Hong Kong provided enriched data for further analysis through re-visiting, we did not have the equipment available in Australia that was equally 'unobtrusive'. In the interests of minimizing elements that might interfere with the everyday activity of the classroom, we took the decision to only audiotape in the Australian setting.

## **Data Analysis**

All audio and video recordings were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts from Hong Kong and Brisbane were read and analysed separately. Firstly, consistent with the use of phenomenographic methods for data generation, we began with the core assumption that there would be variation in the ways in which the children experience the same 'phenomenon' (Pramling, 1988; Walsh, 2000). In order to make sense of the data, we began by replicating the phenomenographic methods used by Wong (2007) in her earlier study. The analyzing process involved very intense and personal interaction with the data. A grouping sorting process was then instigated to identify those meaning units that appeared to have some connection and those that appeared to stand alone. Attention was paid to similarities and differences in forms of excerpts, expressions and words.

The children's words constituted the data, which was first organized into 'categories of description' or conceptions (Marton, 1981). All the ideas expressed by the participants were taken into consideration. Responses from different participants were grouped according to similarities and organized in subcategories. Finally, the two separate bodies of data were considered alongside each other. The Hong Kong conversations were conducted in the children's own language. Transcripts were translated to English, and later translated back, for authenticity and reliability. We were satisfied that this approach had captured everything that the children had said about art, and would help us to address our first question: Why do young children draw and paint?

Additionally, we drew on a particular understanding of discourse (Foucault, 1984, 1986) and technologies of the self (Foucault, 1988) in order to address our second question: What does art do? In a second, poststructuralist reading of the data, we were interested in the discourses that appeared to be available to the children, when called on to talk about art, and how these discourses might shape the ways in which children see art, and how they might shape their sense of themselves. The approach taken for this analysis was drawn from the work of Cohen (1995), and began with identifying key words that appeared to constitute an indicative or core vocabulary of a discourse. These key words were read as standing proxy for the views and values that underpin the discourse.

The next section of the paper provides an account of the data, and our readings of this data. We propose that there are a number of discourses in play in the children's language use, some that we expected, and some that surprised us. It is a partial account of what the children said, filtered through particular lenses. At the end of the paper, we acknowledge some of the limitations of our study, as well as proposing other

possible ways of reading the data.

## **What the children said**

Five key ways of speaking art emerged in both cohorts. Individual children shifted between these ways of seeing/thinking. They did not fall neatly into one 'camp' or the other. Rather, we propose that these clusterings contain traces of the discourses available to children, when they are asked to speak about art.

We were surprised that four of the five discursive constructions were common across both bodies of data. Our readings of the literature, and of the classrooms, and teachers' approaches, had led us to expect much more mismatch across the two different cultural contexts. There were variations within these four discourses but, nevertheless, we read them as traces of the same discourses. The fifth discourse for each cohort is indeed different, and we leave this departure for the end of this section of the paper. First, we discuss the four shared discourses.

### **1. Art as natural**

The main feature of this discourse is the taken-for-granted. Children from both cities spoke of art as a natural quality. When asked how they learned to make art, or who taught them, children responded:

I always know how to make art (Yannie, HK)

Nobody doesn't know how to make art (Milo, HK)

I don't know. The first time I did it I was only three. (Carly, BNE)

God (Anthony, BNE)

The children's responses suggest that they experience art making as an innate desire and pleasure. When asked why they were doing the particular activity, some responded:

Every child likes to make art (Martin, HK)

Drawing is interesting. Because I love to draw (Leo, HK)

Cause I want to (Marie, BNE)

Because it's fun (John, BNE)

Perhaps this is a matter of the children having no other words, but it is difficult to imagine this would be the case if asked about learning to read, for instance. The

image of the child as 'pure and natural' (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998) can work to shape teachers' practices. In their efforts to preserve the child's 'natural' creativity, many teachers adopt the laissez faire approach to the teaching of art (McArdle and Piscitelli, 2002). They act as the facilitator, providing resources, but reluctant to appear too didactic. Or, if they do teach specific skills or knowledge, they work to disguise the instruction, and strive to 'teach without teaching' (McArdle and McWilliam, 2005). This could be one explanation for why the children produce themselves as 'naturally' capable. Art is something one does not need to learn, nor be taught.

## 2. Art as task

In this second group of responses, the emphasis is on the actual work of doing of art. Art is part of their schooling requirements, a task to be done in preschool. When asked why they were doing art, some responded:

Because in school, teacher has to teach us [to draw] (Calvin, HK)

It is time for drawing. If you don't make art and only play...that's lazy (Calvin, HK)

In one conversation in Brisbane, when asked about what other things she did that she considered art, Marie responded:

Things with Ms Junor (school art teacher) (Marie, BNE)

The children spoke here of art as primarily an extrinsically motivated learning task, either driven by, or at their teachers' behest.

We make art when teachers ask us to (Tony, HK)

The teachers asked us to use these materials (Irene, HK)

Because she [the teacher] likes us to do art (Hannah, BNE)

Hannah also went into detail, describing the process for one particular task:

[...] first we started drawing a candle, drawing and doing what we wanted, and then we painted it, and our drawing showed up in white...and you couldn't paint over where we did the candles." (Hannah, BNE)

We noted a significant variation between the two groups in this view of art as task. In the Hong Kong group, the children spoke of art only in the context of the regime of the classroom. They understood the activity as something that kept them busy, or used as a transitional activity between "learning activities". For some children, art was not their first priority among various activities, when given the choice.

Because I can get a seat here (Queenie, HK)

Because there are no toys for me to play with (Jonathan, HK)

I am waiting for my turn to go to the dramatic corner so I have come here to take a rest. I am bored. The computer is occupied (Calvin, HK)

Some children in the Brisbane setting had similar responses, but another version of art as task emerged in some of their responses. They spoke of tasks beyond their classroom. In the course of some conversations, the researcher asked the children about "artists", and some responded:

Ms Junor...because she likes doing art and that's how she had her job (Annah, BNE)

Because if they do art, some people will give them money, and then the money helps them to buy some art from other people, and they can hang them on their wall" (Tim, BNE)

Later in this paper, when we come to the fifth and different discourse, we discuss this point further.

Outcomes based curriculum expectations can shape teachers' practice, and Wright (2003) describes the Reproductive Approach, where the children are required to reproduce art tasks, prescribed by the teacher. Generally, these tasks are designed to be developmentally appropriate, at a level of skill and technique considered suitable for children at a certain age and stage. It is easy to see how teachers could observe children engaging with these tasks, and make the presumption that art is something that the children like to do. And possibly it is. But, for children like Queenie, Jonathan and Calvin, their choices appear to be more pragmatic. Children learn quickly how to 'do school', and the benefits of complying, and meeting the teachers' expectations.

### **3. Art as process**

When asked how they learned art, in contrast with the natural discourse, others spoke of art as a process. This included specific processes to be learned, and also social processes.

He saw what I am doing and followed me. When I saw him doing this, I copied him (Kitty, HK)

My mom taught me. I copy the way she folds [paper]. (David, HK)

Well, I think I was about 2 or 3 and somebody came along and did a drawing right in front of me and I discovered art! (Henry, BNE)

This resonates with the findings in Wong's earlier study with older children (2007), who spoke of their memories of close physical contact with a parent, who held their hands and taught them how to draw. In this follow-up study with younger children, they



appreciated the opportunities afforded them through art to enjoy the company of their peers, and their parents.

Children in both communities spoke of how they learn and improve themselves through the process. They spoke of learning to master skills, by doing, and by practice.

I don't know why I can draw hearts. I just knew after trying many times (Jenny, HK)

I practiced (Tim, BNE)

Well you have to practice and practice (Mark, BNE)

In contrast with the notion that art is fun, some of the children in both communities also spoke of the art making process as not easy.

Sometimes making art is tough, sometimes not...making is not tough, but thinking is tough...I think of something but do not know how to draw...I think for a while, then I don't draw anymore (Jonathan, HK)

You have to be really gentle and don't shake because it is very hard to draw a person, and if they be still, they can paint themselves and they can do it [self portrait] (Donald, BNE)

Well it makes me feel good...sometimes my hand gets a little bit sore from doing it (Jed, BNE)

The idea of the social process was more evident in the Hong Kong data. For a number of these children, the nature and the content of the art activities did not appear to be the most important factor. Rather, it was the social that took precedence.

Sometimes I will go to art corner, sometimes not. Because I always want to play with Helen. She is my good friend. If Helen makes art, I will make art, too (Bill, HK)

The children's words here are reflected in both the art-for-life's-sake and art-for-art's-sake discourses. Echoes of Vygotsky's (1978) principles of co-construction and the lending of expertise are evident in the data. At the same time, those more intangible benefits of an arts rich program, more difficult to demonstrate, are illustrated in the children's pleasure in engaging in an activity that is a social experience, as well as a learning experience. This is in contrast with the earlier view of art as task, designed and controlled by the teacher, and involving a one way transmission of knowledge and skills. More than simply being fun, these responses indicate a level of sophistication in how the children understand art and themselves.

#### **4. Art as product**

When asked what they were doing in the art space, some simply named the product:

I am making a telescope (Kitty, HK)

It's a self portrait (James, BNE)

It's decorating things (Marie, BNE)

Others, in the Brisbane cohort only, referred to art in the art gallery, made by artists, or made with certain materials.

It's nothing...old stuff, old paintings (Callum, BNE)

It's a picture. It's a sort of a picture of something on something that has been done by somebody...artists (Hannah, BNE)

Drawings and paintings..., cards, doing things we've made [with paper, paints]. (Hannah, BNE)

Both groups of children spoke of their art products as having functional purpose, such as gifts for others, or decorations.

[Teacher] lets us make many things, and take them home to mom. I want to make lots of things for mummy (Calvin, HK)

My family give me lots of presents, so I give them my drawings (Calvin, HK)

So we can give it to our mums and dads (James, BNE)

We noticed, particularly in the Hong Kong data, that some children were aware that their efforts at art brought recognition and appreciation by others.

The adults like our drawings...let children draw, and give them to mom, mom will be very happy. Children will be happy. Mom smile, then she will buy me something (Leo, HK)

Even it is not easy, we have to make it. We have to give a gift to teacher. She will be happy then (Calvin, HK)

We found some evidence of a sense of aesthetic, and some understanding of the elements of art. In the Hong Kong data, we found this in the children's talk of their own artwork:

I like to use different colours, it will be more beautiful (Cindy, HK)

Make it slowly and be careful (David, HK)

In the Brisbane data, we also found this appreciation in the wider context:

You can look into one of their [artists'] paintings and you can think about something else and...it looks really nice. Something like that (Hannah, BNE)

A prevailing mantra in early childhood arts education is that it's the process, not the product' that is important. Teachers are urged to focus on the children's processes, and not judge their success by the final product. This construction of art links closely with notions of creativity and children's 'natural' abilities, and discourages critiques of final products, for fear of damaging self esteem. But, in these responses, we see that at least some children consider the product important, for a variety of reasons. The rewards for their art activities are attention, approval and praise. Adults are charmed by their efforts. With presumably little or no access to any other means, art also enables the children to be gift givers. In contrast with being positioned as defined by the teachers' expectations, some children talked about the content and ideas presented in their artwork, as something that originated from them.

Up to this point, we have displayed the data that we mapped into four discourses, common across the two settings. We consider that, regardless of the differences in culture, setting and teaching approach, these discourses were in play for both groups of children. In the following section, we discuss a fifth discourse for each cohort, but they are different, according to the setting.

### **5a. A Mystery (Hong Kong)**

When asked about art beyond preschool, the children in Brisbane showed an awareness of artists in the community, and the possibilities of working at art as an adult. But the children in Hong Kong had another position. They made comments such as Cindy's:

I think the adults do not like art. Because I haven't seen them make art (Cindy, HK)

Other children made similar statements. They said that their older brothers and sisters did not make art. When they went to school, they had to learn. It seemed a mystery to them that they were expected to make art at preschool, but that nowhere else did art seem important – certainly not at school, or for any of the adults in their lives. Art then was only something that children did in preschool.

If teacher doesn't ask us to, we won't make art...you learn nothing from art...Art is useless (Milo, HK)

Art is not very important. Teacher asks you to draw then you draw. I only draw when the teacher asks us (Jonathan, HK)

Even Cindy, who made careful choices about her colors, was quite matter-of-fact about how important art was, once children went to school:

Homework is more important (Cindy, HK)

It would seem that to a certain degree, the ambivalence that Berger et al(1972) describes, with art being at once valued and dismissed, is mirrored in these children's own preschool culture. They appear to understand that, while their preschool teachers value art, and their parents are charmed by their gifts, this is confined to young children and preschool – soon, they will “put away childish things” and take on the more serious business of ‘learning’. Here, art defines them as young children, not yet developed to the stage of ‘learning’, and spending considerable time and effort at something that is of no value outside this age and stage.

One explanation we propose is the cultural difference in emphasis on academic outcomes, and the markedly higher stakes emphasis in Hong Kong on academic achievement and success in school. It is not necessarily so that art education enjoys higher status in Australian schools and curricula, but the children in the Brisbane group did not speak about this specifically. Indeed, many of the children in the Brisbane group described themselves as artists, and spoke about the art in the gallery, and the artists who produced the works. Art, in the Hong Kong preschool, worked to position the children as at a distinct developmental level, setting them apart from older children who presumably were considered ready for ‘learning’.

### **5b. No rules (Australia)**

The children in the Brisbane Prep had a different sense of themselves, through art. We identified a fifth discourse of art here, which we call ‘no rules’. When asked about artists, some of them spoke of themselves as artists.

Well I am sort of an artist because I am drawing (Hannah, BNE)

We're all artists (Xanthe, BNE)

When asked “what is art?” some children, including Xanthe, had a very broad and ‘anything goes’ view:

Everything you do is art even a scribble, even a dot, everything you draw is just a piece of artwork (Xanthe, BNE)

I know that...it's something that you draw and even a dot is art (Edward, BNE)

Possibly, this idea of the dot, which a number of children mentioned, emerged as a result of their earlier studies of Australian Indigenous art, some of which includes the now famous dot paintings (see for example, the Papunya art movement, circa 1970s). Others told the researcher, with a deal of pleasure, that it was something everyone could do:

it's just coloring (Gemma, BNE)

Another point made by the children was the freedom art afforded them. For them art meant ‘no right or wrong’, and spoke about art as the place where “mistakes” and

“corrections” are acceptable:

[...] get something wrong in art you just try to do it again (Max, BNE)

The idea of freedom in art is a popular one with many early childhood educators, but freedom from what? In many cases, this is freedom from academic constraints, not freedom to express (Bresler, 1993). In Australia, ideas of democratic principles and egalitarian values make the “no right or wrong” view of art attractive to many teachers. If all young children’s efforts are celebrated and praised, with no judgment necessary, and the end product unimportant, then every child can enjoy success in art. If art is so personal and a matter for the individual, then there is no need for grading and assessment, no failures – and also no excellence. Every player wins a prize! Art in the Brisbane Prep setting works to produce the child as artist, capable and confident, and perhaps with nothing more to learn about art – they are already producing artworks that are considered comparable to the masters.

It was in these last two ways of seeing art that we identified distinct differences that we attribute to cultural aspects. In the final section of this paper, we resist rushing to any universal ‘findings’ about art and art education, based on the words of these two groups of children. We do however, share some of our thinking around our two original questions, and also propose some ways in which this small research project might contribute to the work of researchers and educators who continue to look for ways to improve ways of working with young children in the arts.

## **Conclusion**

Firstly, we suggest that the in the words spoken by the children in this study, as in the arts education literature, we found traces of many of the dominant discourses that shape and are shaped by the work of teachers in their classrooms. Why do young children draw and paint? We propose that, from the children’s point of view, they draw and paint because: it is ‘natural’, fun, and they can; their teachers insist; they become proficient, through practice; their parents are charmed by their works; they can give their artworks as gifts; they make and maintain friendships through making art together. We admit to a number of surprises, not the least being the absence of a discourse that is dominant in the literature and curriculum documents – nowhere in the data did we find any traces of the discourse of art as a form of self-expression. To over-analyse silences would be a mistake, given the number of contingencies in this study. Nevertheless, with evidence of the presence of other discourses in play, we were surprised that this was absent in the body of data.

Secondly, what does art do? We propose that the art activities worked to shape children’s sense of self in a number of ways. At times, art enabled children to develop a positive sense of self – competent and capable, agentic and able to make choices, learn and improve, and connect with others socially. At other times, the children’s engagement with art worked to produce a sense of being defined by the developmental beliefs that shape the schooling system, compliant, teacher directed, and positioned by sometimes mysterious rules and contradictions.

Like any data, this body of work could be read in other ways. For instance, we could

re-read through a gender lens, or we could track the statements of key informants, or we could quantify the number of times each different view was expressed. Each reading could add to the story. In addition, there were a number of contingencies that most assuredly impacted on this study. The children in Brisbane had very recently visited the State Art Gallery, and held an exhibition of their own work in their classroom. Conversations about art had taken a specific direction, which may have been due, in some part at least, to the teacher's approach. Other factors, such as timing of the interviews, the presence of a video camera, and open-ended conversations conducted by two different researchers, can all have affected what the children said. Controlling for all contingencies might be possible, but it might also inhibit some of the rich diversity we were able to capture across the two cohorts. Notwithstanding, we conclude with a final provocation, which we feel emerges from what we were able to capture, and from what we learned through accessing the children's ways of seeing and speaking art.

It is not enough to observe children from a distance, and plan programs for learning, based on assumptions about what they are doing and thinking. A teacher might see the children rush to the art corner, and assume this is because they enjoy art. But, as we learned when we asked the children, sometimes they are marking time; sometimes they are hurrying to complete the task so they can go to their preferred activity; and sometimes they are choosing to go there because of their friends. It is equally undesirable to take the role of the teacher out of teaching, and privilege the voice of the children above all else. We conclude this account with a call for reflective practice, which emerges from close and careful observations, actively listening to what the children have to say, and taking their words and actions into account, when planning for teaching by designing quality programs that enable children to learn, improve and develop – their sense of themselves and their creativity and artistry.

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