Conducting and Reporting Research: Original Papers

Building Positive Research Relationships with Young Children

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Abstract

My research investigated four young Australian children's experiences of art in their homes, and as they moved from early childhood centres to schools. Each child had a digital camera with which s/he took photographs of art and wider experiences. Over approximately a one-year period, I regularly met with the children in their homes, preschool, and schools. The intense involvement in the children's lives, and the use of digital photography through which meaning was shared and negotiated, constituted a visual ethnographic approach (Pink, 2001) and the children's conversations, images and experiences generated narratives of experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Building positive and dynamic research relationships with the children, their families, teachers and wider communities was vital throughout the research. This paper outlines the principles that guided my interactions with young research participants. These principles considered how perspectives on children, research and theory influenced research processes; how co-researcher's roles are negotiated and dynamic; and how research relationships developed and changed over time and experience. The paper also considers the tensions that arose when working at the boundaries of one's own beliefs and those of the research participants.

Introduction

Over approximately one year, using a visual ethnographic approach (Pink, 2001) I investigated four young Australian children's experiences of art in their homes, early childhood centres and schools. The children acted as co-researchers as they each had a digital camera with which they took photographs of art and wider experiences and discussed their photographs with me. The photographs, interactions and discussions formed the basis of co-constructed research narratives which aimed at making meaning from experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). From both a narrative inquiry and visual ethnographic perspective establishing and maintaining positive research relationships was essential. As the Australian *National statement on ethical conduct in human research* states, the "relationship between researchers and research participants is the ground on which human research is conducted" (Australian Government, 2007, p. 11). However, in the field of early childhood art experience I did not find articles focusing on developing positive relationships with young participants. Therefore, in preparation for fieldwork I explored literature on

researching with young children and in relation to my chosen methodologies. I developed principles to guide my research relationships from the works of Graue and Walsh (1998), Pink (2001) and Clandinin and Connelly (2000).

This paper discusses these principles with reference to my research project, providing insights into children's use of cameras in research and their roles as co-researchers and visual ethnographers. Such discussion may be useful to researchers working with young children, and counter the dominant practice of portraying children as anonymous and decontextualised participants (Robbins, 2005). The following discussion provides an overview of the background of my research and research methods employed. Threading examples of personal research experiences through this discussion, I will expand on the principles that guided the development and maintenance of positive research relationships with young children.

Research on Young Children's Experience of Art

Background to Study

Although some research considers children's art experiences in their homes, early childhood or school settings (for example Brooks, 2002; Kindler, 1996; Matthews, 2003; Richards, 2003b; Ring, 2003), there are limited representations of children's perspectives on art experience across these contexts. There is also a lack of art research that documents "the interpretations and narratives of young people" (Wilson, 2004, p. 323). A case in point is Ring's (2003) study which investigated children's drawing activities in their homes, early childhood and school settings. Adult interviews dominated research method, and Ring noted that "the child's voice was not being 'heard'. The parent and practitioner was mediating the child's 'versions' of their drawings" (p. 69). Ring's data collection also involved some visual methods, including scrapbooks of children's art and photographs taken by adults of their children's experiences. She noted that "drawing, alongside other forms of visual evidence such as photographs and digital images, …[were] a powerful tool within the research process" (2003, p. 122).

Brooks (2002) made greater use of visual data, as she used digital video to record her Grade One children's drawing activities in relation to learning within the school curriculum. Her visual ethnographic approach linked with Vygotskian social constructionist perspectives, which "extends the meaning of the social to include the cultural and historical aspects of the social contexts" and the co-construction of knowledge (Brooks, 2002, p. 110). Her analysis focused on the relationship between thought and drawing, and how drawing functioned as a learning tool (Brooks, 2005, 2006).

Brooks' (2002) and Ring's research and literature (Anning & Ring, 2004; Ring, 2003) prompted me to consider how to extend visual methodologies to further represent children's perspectives and to involve children in the use of digital photography. While Brooks and Ring researched on a part-time basis, I had a two-year full-time research Fellowship from Massey University (see Footnote 1). This allowed me to be ethnographically involved in the children's lives, building collaborative research relationships that involved the children as co-researchers and visual ethnographers. I will now briefly outline my methodology.

Research Methods

The overall aim of the research was to present children's perspectives of their experience of art in their homes, preschools and schools, and to consider how each child experienced art as

a son or daughter, a preschool child and school pupil (see Footnote 2). Furthermore, this longitudinal study considered how each child experienced art as they transitioned between home and preschool and school. The four child participants, with the pseudonyms of Sophie, Lilly, Jackson and Lee, were aged between four-years seven-months, and five-years four-months at the beginning of the research. They had digital cameras with which they took photographs of their art and wider experiences. Over twelve-months, during school/preschool terms I visited each child at least once a week, in their home, preschool, or school, and less frequently during holidays. During home-based visits, the children displayed their digital photographs on a laptop and told me about these. The photographs and conversations were digitally recorded and saved.

The intense involvement in the children's lives, and the use of the children's digital photography through which meaning was shared and negotiated, constituted a collaborative visual ethnographic approach (Pink, 2001). Throughout the research process the children's photographs and discussions, and my observations and interactions, became the visual and verbal narratives of the children's lived experiences of art. Over the course of the project the themes that the children explored through their art (such as kinship, or racial difference), and their stories of lived experience were shared. Employing narrative inquiry, these shared and re-shared stories intertwined with research processes, as we developed relationships "between living a life story, retelling a life story, and reliving a life story" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 71). These verbal and visual narratives were the basis for analysing the children's experiences of art. This analysis is ongoing and will be reported on in future publications.

While children's digital photography provided a "rich, multilayered and mediated form of communication" (Christensen & James, 2000a, p. 160) the use of photography significantly heightened the need for respectful and trustworthy relationships over a variety of contexts. Pink (2001) points out that while ethical issues cannot be finalized until the researcher is in the field, ethical dilemmas can be minimised if there is collaboration between the researchers and participants.

Visual ethnographic approaches involved me in actively generating data with children in a collaborative way, and literature on researching with children provided background to my methodology (for example Christensen & James, 2000b; Farrell, 2005; Fraser, Lewis, Ding, Kellett, & Robinson, 2004; Greene & Hogan, 2005). However, as Hill (2005) points out, involving children as co-researchers is still the exception. Therefore, I was charting relatively new areas as I endeavoured to foster collaborative relationship with the children through visual ethnography. I looked at research involving children and visual methods (such as Clark, 1999; Cook & Hess, 2007; Fasoli, 2003; Mizen, 2005; Orellana, 1999) and noted that in most studies the children used disposable cameras with 24 exposure films, rather than digital. Therefore there were limited connections between the act of taking photographs and the children's responses to their photographs. These studies, therefore, provided limited insights into my own approach to building positive research relationships with children.

Over the course of the project, I established and maintained relationships with many different individuals and with people who represented the interests of others – such as parents, teachers, principals and Department of Education officials. Although I knew some of these people prior to the research project, relationships evolved and changed over the course of the research project. Moreover, in the unequal relationship that often exists between children and adults, I felt that my attitudes and beliefs about research with children

needed thoughtful scrutiny. Therefore, prior to entering the research field I considered how to build and maintain positive and dynamic relationships.

Research Relationships

My research involved a narrative approach and Clandinin and Connelly (2000) claimed that boundaries existed between this approach and reductionistic and formalistic approaches, where all experience was seen in terms of playing out the "hegemonies of politics, culture, gender, and framework" (p. 40). Therefore, I needed to be "autobiographically conscious" of my reactions to my work (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000p. 46) as tensions can arise when working at the boundaries of my own 'narrative history' and that of the actual research narrative. Furthermore, Graue and Walsh (1998) suggested that the "act of research is conceived as nested contexts, including the researcher's perspectives on research, theory, and in this case, children; the role negotiated with/by the participants; and the relationships that ensue over time" (p. 73). These ideas provided a framework to examine my attitudes, practices and relationships when researching with young children. I will discuss these points with reference to my research, and consider some of the tensions that arose when working at the boundaries of my collaborative visual ethnographic research and some dominant views of childhood and research with children.

Considering Perspectives on Children, Research and Theory

Perspectives on Children

Just as Ball (2005) believed that research with Indigenous communities should benefit these people "substantially within the foreseeable future" (p. 86) I reminded myself that parents did not share their child's lives with me for my benefit or for a sense of 'greater good', but in the belief that their child benefited from this experience. Therefore, prior to participant selection I asked myself, "If I were a parent why would I allow my child to be involved in this research; how would s/he benefit from working with this person?" These questions not only considered what I brought to the research, my views about childhood and children's rights, but how I would develop positive relationships with the child participants.

Principally, in considering the above questions, I believed that I contributed to the children's experiences of interacting with a caring adult. I gave each child focused attention, acknowledging their opinions, feelings and experiences, and I provided a child with an audience who was genuinely interested in his or her perspectives. As an adult, I responded to their humour and happiness, and helped them to deal with discomfort or unease. I considered their physical and emotional needs, and made sure that no harm came to them. Though not a word often used in research (and certainly not the language used in my official ethical approval procedures), I contributed to the love that each child experienced in their social world. I also brought to our interactions my own experience in art and art education, believing that our joint focus on this aspect of their lives enriched their experience of art and had a positive effect on their art self-efficacy (Richards, 2003a, 2003b).

I regarded children as competent problem solvers and communicators, whose individual voices and actions needed to be heard and visible in research. Like others, (such as Alderson, 2000; Jones, 2004; Morrow, 2005), I considered children capable of being co-researchers or collaborators. Furthermore, the research methodology needed to "be ethical, involve the use of appropriate approaches and fit the purpose in hand" (Abbott & Langston, 2005, p. 39). Therefore, the theories that underpinned my attitudes and beliefs about children as co-researchers influenced how research relationships developed.

Perspectives on Research and Theory

I used visual ethnographic methods (Pink, 2001), where the children's photographs and conversations set the pace and direction of the research, and positioned us as co-researchers. Employing a narrative inquiry approach to understanding experience, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) built on Dewey's philosophies (1938) in developing the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space of the interactive, situation and continuity. Dewey's (1934) philosophies on art as experience, and Vygotsky's sociocultural historical perspectives were influential in my analytical framework.

Dewey regarded art experience and 'real experience' as inseparable, and he emphasised "the interaction of process and product, and the social aspects of artistic experience" (Freedman, 2001, p. 38). Both Dewey's and Vygotsky's theories "emphasised a historically contingent notion of individuality" and whereas "Dewey's central focus was on community, Vygotsky focused on language as the instrument which would transfer social experiences to the individual" (Popkewitz, 1998, p. 537-8). Vygotsky regarded important aspects of art, such as the "absurdities, nonsense, inversions", as very close to children's play (Lindqvist, 2003, p. 248), and regarded art as an important part of human experience.

Vygotsky was interested in both the arts (1925, 1931) and development in early childhood (1933, 1962, 1978). Regarding language as a primary mediating cultural tool Vygotsky believed that "make-believe play, drawing, and writing can be viewed as different moments in an essentially unified process of development of written language" (1978, p. 115). However, many Western studies that built on his ideas took a narrow definition of language as verbal mediation (Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000), thus ignoring make-believe play or drawing. Therefore, as far as possible I explored the translated works of Vygotsky, drawing on his theories, research practices and attitudes towards participants.

Vygotsky reportedly established trusting and empathetic relationships with child participants (Vygodskaya, 1995), believing that teachers were learners, and learners were teachers, and that higher psychological functions originated as actual relations between human individuals. I concurred with Vygotskian and Deweyan perspectives that art not only provided unique aesthetic qualities in human experience, but children used art to shape social connections. These perspectives on children, research and theory influenced the decisions I made about research methods and relationships.

Working at the Boundaries

I experienced tensions as research relationships evolved, and joint understandings were negotiated. For example, Lee was a bilingual Chinese-Australian child and at our first meeting his father, Xiaoming, challenged the robustness of my qualitative research. Xiaoming had a PhD in computer science and we spoke for over an hour, comparing qualitative and quantitative methods. By doing so we generated a better understanding of each other's perspectives, and the way the research may unfold. Had I been unprepared for the tensions generated by disparate theoretical positions, I may have found this part of the research process too confronting and have not selected Lee.

Tensions also arose over children's camera use. In response to an article about research methods (Richards, 2007), an anonymous peer reviewer suggested that young children were unable to competently use digital cameras. Furthermore, some school and preschools policies controlled or prohibited the use of digital cameras. These tensions were positive insofar as they alerted me to aspects of my research that needed thorough consideration. The four children attended the same preschool, and in consultation with the director, a policy on

digital photography in research contexts was developed. This policy was subsequently modified and included in the *State Education Research Approval Process* (SERAP) application.

While my research was approved by the University of New England Human Research Ethics Committee, I experienced tensions as I considered how my research met NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) guidelines for research in public schools. The SERAP application process used several criteria for approving research including "educational benefit to NSW government schools and students" (NSW DET, 2006, p. 9). The proposed research was seen as beneficial to schools if it contributed towards government goals.

The first National Goal listed eight points following the statement that, "schooling should develop fully the talents and capabilities of all students. In particular, when students leave school they should…" Thus, as I considered how my research participants moved in context and time between preschool and school, I was re-directed towards considering the children as school leavers. The children's present time of childhood at school, was overshadowed by a theoretical framework that placed the "importance of childhood in…the future" (James & Prout, 1997, p. 234). The government goals also had overt economic features as they provided a "basis for investment in schooling to enable young people to engage effectively with an increasingly complex world" (NSW DET, 1999, p.2). Research approval procedures also required me to consider the NSW Corporate Plan, which lists five goals aimed "to achieve outcomes that meet the needs and expectations of our partners and lead to sustainable improvements in the social and economic wellbeing of the people of NSW" (NSW DET, 2005, p. 1).

Thus, while working at the boundaries of my own research beliefs, narratives and ethics I also considered the legislated beliefs and ethics of the context in which the research took place. As a result, aspects of my SERAP application highlighted educational benefits that were more central to government policies, and the 'greater good', than they were to my personal beliefs about the benefits of art-based research with young children and the importance of interpersonal relationships in research.

Role Negotiation with and by Child Participants

My research, considered cultural, social and historical aspects of children's art experiences, and recognized the complex "funds of knowledge" that these children were party to (González & Moll, 2002). I stayed mindful of how the research process and interpersonal relationships impacted on children's lived experiences at many levels, and the way all humans enact roles that are partly dependent on social and physical context.

My involvement with the children involved three key contexts – their homes, preschool, and schools, and in each of these places, the children enacted various roles. For example Lee, was energetic, animated, gregarious, comical and boisterous at home. However, at preschool he was quiet, serious, and largely solitary. Later, as a schoolboy, he was industrious and introverted. I needed to be sensitive to the changing roles that Lee played, and modify my own behaviour accordingly.

Physical interactions with the children changed over time and place. Interactions between adults and children in the home were often more physical and demonstrative than those in educational settings, and I found that the children related differently to me in each situation. For example, at home Jackson organized games for us to play together and taught me how to throw a boomerang. In general, over the time, physicality also tended to increase in terms of playful behaviour, hugs and physical proximity. For example, Sophie who usually sat in a

chair later squeezed onto the same chair as me, and sometimes on my knee. There was always at least one parent present during each home visit. This encouraged the children to feel comfortable with me, and allowed me to check that the parents were comfortable with my interactions with their child.

Working at the Boundaries

The way the children and I interacted at home, was not the same as our school or pre-school interactions. The school environment was especially different to home or preschool as I endeavored to create minimum disruption, while also helping the teachers. One school was concerned that my focused attention on the research participant/s could cause equity issues – and the principal told me that it was important that "no child should feel more important than any other". To involve the children in the change of my role at school, I talked with them prior to visits, and again after the school visits. The children had experienced being schoolchildren and were supportive of my need to act like a school-adult as I interacted will all the children in the class. As an experienced teacher, the classroom teachers often asked me to work with a group or help individual children. In many ways, because I continued to visit the children in their homes and our relationships continued to evolve, I felt the children were both my supporters and co-conspirator as I enacted this new role. Their acceptance of my new role allowed my active engagement in classroom life, without fear that they felt sidelined. The children and I also developed subtle interpersonal communication, such as facial expressions, which allowed us to communicate without words.

Thus, far from being established entities, the ways of being for the children and I were negotiated between the various people in the research community, and place influenced the nature of verbal and physical interactions. In reality, the children and I supported each other in enacting roles that were appropriate in each context, without violating the overall integrity of our interpersonal and research relationships.

At times in the field, I felt the tension between my role as collaborator with the children, and the expectations placed on us in various contexts, especially at school. For example, over the course of the research Lee used many amusing nicknames and at one stage, he playfully called me "sweetie-darling". However, when I joined Lee and his mother at the orientation day at his school I suggested that we call each other by our first names at school. I did this to protect Lee from possible embarrassment, but I was also conscious of adding to the many voices that encouraged him to modify his behaviour to that deemed appropriate for school. That the children and I could behave in an appropriate manner at school was important to some of the parents, who were concerned about their child experiencing awkwardness or embarrassment. Two school principals also voiced concern about disruption to classroom behaviour, or additional burdens on teachers. As it transpired, the teachers enjoyed my presence in their classrooms and expressed regret when the project concluded. My previous classroom experiences, especially as an advisor to schools, helped me to adjust to the changing classroom dynamics. Moreover, the children helped me to enact a more teacher-like role when in their classrooms. I believe that this also allowed the children to act more pupil-like if they wished to.

Relationships Develop and Change Over Time and Experience

Relationships with children and families evolved over time. In the beginning, I talked with the parents about the importance of allowing their child to take the lead in the discussions. While the parents' participation in the home-based discussion was not generally verbal, they eagerly looked on as their child showed and discussed their photographs. Their presence

supported their child, and often a parent communicated with me through facial expressions that prompted me to ask their child to elaborate, or helped me to link together episodes. These types of interactions demonstrated that not only was I building theories about the children's art experience, but so too were the parents and children.

In general, child-adult interactions tend to reflect power imbalances. However, researching with children across a variety of contexts, including their own homes, helped to address this. Overall, while children were accustomed to a variety of adults in preschool and school contexts, these same people did not visit their homes. Furthermore, adults who visited a home were seldom there for the express purpose of interacting with a specific child. As Morrow noted in her research, "children are always in a structural relationship to the adults around them: as a child of their families, as somebody's son or daughter, or a 'school' child" (2005, p. 160) Therefore, home visits allowed for unique adult-child relationships. How this relationship developed depended on each situation, but I was conscious of generating my own negotiated role - by acting like neither a childlike friend nor an adult. I achieved this in part by focusing my attention on each child, engaging in their banter and humour, and physically engaging in play when invited. I was genuinely interested in their perspectives, and all parents were supportive of the relationships we built. In many ways, the home environment was a safe space for the children as they could "share their ideas without challenge or critique" (MacNaughton & Smith, 2005, p. 115).

Working at the Boundaries

The dialectic nature of the interactions within the research project meant that relationships developed in subtle yet dynamic ways. Over time, while the children provided greater direction in driving the nature of the visits, we developed research routines and rituals that allowed the research process to flow. I became most aware of the change in relationships, and potential tensions, when on two occasions parents who were not usually present at home-based research discussions, were surprised by their child's response to me. One father asked his son to "stop mucking around" – yet hiding when I arrived had developed as a fun start to the session for this child, and set the playful tone of our sessions. Another parent was surprised when I said that it has been a good session with her daughter - although her daughter had been "distractible". Over the previous four months, I realised that these distractions – such as looking for a toy or drawing, nearly always related to the overall themes developing around her art experiences.

My active involvement in the children's classroom communities, allowed some continuity between home and preschool research processes. However Lilly, Sophie, Lee and Jackson appeared to assimilate ways of being a schoolchild that influenced the choices they made. For example, while the children all eagerly used the cameras at preschool and home, they were reluctant to use it independently at school unless specifically encouraged to – perhaps appraising that adults made the decisions at school. Therefore, tensions at the boundaries of dominant beliefs or behaviours, and research beliefs and behaviours were an issue for all co-researchers.

Just as starting the research project was problematic, so too was exiting the field (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). More than ten months elapsed between first home visits and final school visits. While some home visits continued, I prepared the children for the change of routine. I explained that I would write up their stories and discuss these with them, but I would no longer visit them at school, and my visits to their homes would become less frequent. The children knew I would return to New Zealand, and they talked about my other home. Lilly, in one of my last official home visits, said that while I was still in Australia writing stories I

could still visit her – but to come for dinner and have some drinks. It was a comfort to know that she understood that although the research relationships concluded, the bond we had built continued to evolve.

Thus, as the parents and I supported the children in taking the lead in aspects of the research process, unique relationships developed. The children not only displayed the ability to develop fluid relationships, but they showed an understanding of how our relationship changed and developed over time and experience.

Concluding Comments

This article considers how I developed positive research relationships with four young participants while co-researching their art experiences. From the onset I prioritised the need to develop positive research relationships and in this discussion I have focused on the principles that guided me. These principles included a consideration of how my perspectives on children, research and theory impacted on the research processes; the need to be mindful of the variety of roles any one person can and does play, and to be responsive to the needs of the participants in any given situation. I also recognized that relationships develop and change over time and experience. Furthermore, while tensions were experienced as research relationships evolved and joint understandings were negotiated, developing positive research relationships was one of the most rewarding aspects of the research processes. My research experiences reinforced and expanded my view of the capabilities of young children, and the potential for building collaborative research relationships.

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Footnotes

1. The Massey University Fellowship provided me with the opportunity to relocate from New Zealand to Australia to work in close association with my main PhD supervisor, Dr. Margaret Brooks, who lectured at the University of New England, in NSW. My research, therefore, involved Australian children.

2. The Australian community in which I lived and researched used the term 'preschool' to describe their early childhood centre. I do likewise in this article and in publications arising from my Australian research.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rosemary Richards is a senior lecturer with Massey University. Her teaching, research and personal interests focus on art, art education and early childhood. Her Masters of Education thesis investigate young children's drawing self efficacy, and she is currently completing a PhD thesis. This research is an ethnographic study of four young Australian children's experiences of art in their homes, early childhood centres and schools as they transition between preschool and school. Rosemary was co-convenor of the 2nd International Art in Early Childhood Conference held in NSW in 2007, and is co-editor of the International Art in Early Childhood Research Journal.