



# Early Childhood Education

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The cover painting was created by Grade 2 student Kaden Shaw, in Raymond Elementary School, Raymond, Alberta. His work is the product of integrated studies led by his student teacher, Hillari Blaylock, a first-year education student at the University of Lethbridge. Grade 2 students discovered the properties of buoyancy and boats in their science lessons and explored the use of various media in art. Before beginning to paint, they examined the work of art masters, with careful attention to the colours used to represent sunsets and oceans. Then, using the brush stroke techniques demonstrated by Ms Blaylock, the children dipped their brushes in tempera paints and created vivid backgrounds for their boats. They cut their boat shapes from scrapbook paper of various textures and positioned them in ways that made clear to viewers that the boats were buoyant and ready to sail into the sunset. Grade 2 masterpieces such as this one are fine examples of visual representation of cross-curricular learning.

## From the Editor's Desk

More years ago than I sometimes like to admit, my teachers' college instructors impressed upon me the benefits of integrated, cross-curricular learning opportunities for young children. Integrated learning, they explained, is the way children learn naturally. Now, it is my turn to extol the virtues of such learning and to advise preservice and inservice teachers to adopt an approach to curriculum that purposefully draws together knowledge, skills, attitudes and values from within or across traditional subject areas to develop a more powerful understanding of key ideas.<sup>1</sup> Engaging children in curriculum that allows for flexibility, builds on their prior knowledge and experiences, unifies their learning, reflects the real world and matches the way they think is surely one of the greatest gifts educators can offer. The place of the arts in such flexible learning and meaning making among children has long been salient.

In this issue, Nicole Jamison reminds us of the importance of children experiencing and making sense of their environments through different forms of understanding. She goes on to show readers how arts-based research involving children can be a powerful way to investigate, inquire and explore the social and cultural contexts along with the lived realities of children within educational settings. Vanessa Fraser and Heather Miller, ECEC Award winners in 2013, share with us how the art projects and instruction in their classroom created space for multiple literacies, especially for the children's language development. Readers will share the teachers' enthusiasm for art as a vehicle for language learning when they read of the children's success. Dramatic play, too, sits front and centre as teacher and facilitator of meaning making and story creation. Gisela Wajskop and Shelley Stagg-Peterson draw on their observations in Brazilian and Canadian classrooms to present their convincing argument that play, especially dramatic play, is fundamental to children's literacy and conceptual and social learning.

It is an exciting time to be a teacher. Never before has so much been known about how children learn and never have there been so many instructional alternatives to meet children's diverse needs. Robbin Gibb and her colleagues shed light on brain function in early learning and share their exciting work with parents and caregivers in shaping preschoolers'

executive functioning. Their work holds promise, and we await further outcomes. While new findings hold intrigue, the past cannot be forgotten. Sherry Waitte and Larry Prochner suggest that knowing the historical trends of early childhood education helps teachers envision the future.

Teachers are lifelong learners. Children and other teachers are the beneficiaries. In telling her story, Brittany Miller explains how her personal experience of being a struggling reader as a child has contributed to being a committed, informed, compassionate teacher. Hers is a story of success—achieved through dedication and persistence.

Some readers will recall that in times past girls sometimes locked and always carefully hid their diaries to keep them from the prying eyes of teasing siblings. Today, personal notes and passionate memos are usually, but not always, encrypted behind passwords. In a new journal feature, readers are not only allowed but invited to read pages from the diaries of three recently retired lifelong educators. Janice, Mary Anne and Rhona share their reflections and lessons learned from their vibrant, trail-blazing careers as teachers and administrators.

Promoting and supporting children's learning is a complex and complicated process. Among other traits, teachers must be creative problem solvers, ready and able to act upon solid knowledge of ever-increasing informative research from many fields. Through sharing their discoveries and reflections, contributors to this issue of *Early Childhood Education* have added significantly to available research and have enriched readers' thinking and pedagogical practice by doing so. Authors' contributions substantively support their teaching colleagues and the work of the Early Childhood Education Council. They are gratefully acknowledged.

In closing, I would like to express my appreciation to the Early Childhood Education Council for the opportunity to serve as editor for this issue. As I pass the reins to the next editor, I am conscious of the tireless efforts of many council members and the fine work that the ECEC does to support educators and children in the province and beyond. I am happy to have had an opportunity to be a part of your strong and powerful team. 🌟

Pamela Winsor

<sup>1</sup> Alberta Education. 2007. *Primary Programs Framework for Teaching and Learning*. "Curriculum Integration: Making Connections," 2.

# Arts-Based Research with Children

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### Abstract

In this article, educators are introduced to the importance of art in the early learning classroom and how art can be used as a form of inquiry or research to investigate an issue, topic or theme. It defines arts-based research and provides current examples of how digital photography and video, drawing, and mixed-media approaches have been used to engage in arts-based research with children. The article then discusses the importance and significance of arts-based research in education. It concludes with suggestions and possible themes that educators could use as a starting point for using arts-based research in their own classroom.

### Introduction

This article introduces how various forms of art can be used to engage in arts-based research with children in a classroom context. When art moves beyond technique, craft or creation of a product, it becomes a vehicle for exploration and communication (Loomis, Lewis and Blumenthal 2007; Marshall 2014). Investigation through various art forms, such as painting, sculpture, drawing, photography or drama, provides a window into how a person negotiates his or her knowledge or understandings of the world and makes meaning (Fasoli 2003; Frei 1999). Many times art acts as a springboard (Loomis, Loomis and Blumenthal 2007) for ideas and emotions to be explored and brought to reality when words are unable to explain. That is why it is important to allow children to organize and make sense of their environment (Gattenhof and Radvan 2009) through “different forms of understanding” (Barone and Eisner 2012, 10). The increased availability of new media, including video, digital and electronic imagery, and

film, now allows for new ways of knowing, and possibilities and concepts to be created (Barone and Eisner 2012; Kirova and Emme 2008). There continues to be a growth in the use of art in both education and research. This approach of using art to explore a theme, issue or context is known as arts-based research.

### What Is Arts-Based Research? Its Forms, Purposes and Participants

Arts-based research is a participatory method (Mand 2012) that allows a teacher and/or researcher and participant(s) to explore a particular topic or inquiry through the making of art products and engagement in creative expressive forms (Barone and Eisner 2012). This can be achieved through drawing, sculpting, painting, photography, video, drama, dance, mapping, construction, stories, songs or poetry (Carter and Ford 2013; Frei 1999; Griebing 2011; Literat 2013; Kirova and Emme 2008; O’Kane 2008; Wright 2007a). Through art, individuals are “free to explore, interpret and expand on reality through imaginative means” (Marshall 2014, 14), and express or communicate their knowledge (Blagojevic and Thomes 2008). They can also demonstrate critical learning (McNiff 2011), their perceptions of the world (Carter and Ford 2013), inner stories and lived realities (Literat 2013). “With an emphasis on visual representation of ideas, [these arts-based research approaches are particularly significant in education because they] can be designed to work with children of different ages with varied literacy skills” (O’Kane 2008, 132) without a reliance on written or oral language skills (Literat 2013). Often it is used with the hope of deepening insight or knowledge (Kirova and Emme 2008), as a means to express multiple meanings (Barone and Eisner 2012) and a new way of seeing (Marshall 2014) or interpreting the world.

Arts-based research in education often lends itself to inquiries focused on social justice, qualities of life

and developing a greater knowledge of people, places or situations (Barone and Eisner 2012). "In arts-based research, the aim is to create an expressive form that will enable an individual to secure an empathic participation in the lives of others and in the situations studied" (Barone and Eisner 2012, 8–9). Carter and Ford (2013) identified arts-based research as a suitable way, even for young children, to engage with existing social realities. This is because artistic thinking and the manipulation of different media or materials (Kay 2013) allows for the "moving back and forth between creation and reflection, images and written text" (Marshall 2014, 14) in a personally relevant manner. Through this process of creation of art there is an opportunity and a space for their ideas, viewpoints, voices, perspectives (Spyrou 2011) and experiences to be heard (Mand 2012) and valued in the research exploration. The new knowledge generated can extend and shape a discipline or domain, much as scientific inquiry or research brings to light new understandings, theories and practices (Marshall 2014).

### **Arts-Based Research Through Photography in Educational Settings**

With increased access to digital technology, many recent arts-based research projects have opted for the use of digital photography for storytelling (Blagojevic and Thomes 2008) and photovoice (Literat 2013). This use of technology has the potential to empower young children as competent participants (Carter and Ford 2013; Popa and Stan 2013) because they are not limited by their inability to read, write or draw (Kirova and Emme 2008). For young children, photography and video can also represent their ideas and fulfill a similar purpose to that of their drawings (Carter and Ford 2013). For example, Popa and Stan (2013) successfully used photography with preschool children to position them as data collectors regarding their perceptions about their learning space at school. Students were interviewed and asked to describe what they had selected to photograph and why. The photographs showed, without relying on drawing or writing, that they themselves, their teachers, instructional resources and decorative elements indoors and outdoors were extremely significant to them (Popa and Stan 2013). This photographic evidence could then inform educators about how to set up the classroom in a way that is meaningful and relevant to the children.

Kaoruko and Sjöberg (2012) similarly examined the use of a camera as an effective way to represent a child's perspective. Participants were either young Japanese children or Swedish youth living in

another country. These children were asked to take photographs of people, places or things that were personally important. At first the visual images of expression were ambiguous to an outsider, but through the accompanying verbal narration the children were able to attach meaning to the images. Similarly, Kirova and Emme (2008), designed and managed a "fotonovela" study with Grades 4 and 5 immigrant students. Students were given predetermined topics; however, "it was the children who decided what story to tell, which pictures to use and in what order, and who would play each character and which thoughts or words would be linked to each character using text balloons" (p 37). The children selected their own photographs to represent their topic and created a visual story to reflect their understandings. The children also began to view their daily scenarios beyond just taking a picture. They then staged photographic scenes to capture their thinking, and this moved into dramatic tableaux performances to portray emotions and actions that accompanied their photographs (Kirova and Emme 2008). Digital photography is an advantageous tool because one photograph can poignantly reflect a person's daily life, social and cultural influences, sense of belonging and identity (Kaoruko and Sjöberg 2012).

### **Arts-Based Research Through Drawing in Educational Settings**

Despite the growing use of digital media, drawing also remains extremely valuable in arts-based research with children. The process of drawing is truly a child-centred activity (Mitchell 2006). Many children enjoy drawing at the level of their capabilities (Mand 2012; Mitchell 2006). A drawing allows a child to represent experiences and understandings, unconstrained by the language and literacy skills (Mand 2012) of reading and writing. The purpose of drawing in arts-based research is not to attend to a specific form or technique of drawing, but rather to use drawing to communicate knowledge, understanding and learning (Schulte 2011). We "learn by *making* things, and thus the very act of generating a creative drawing is a valuable learning opportunity" (Literat 2013, 89). A drawing completed by a child "give[s] insight into the underlying cognitive and emotional processes located within the child" (Hallam, Lee and Das Gupta 2014, 167).

In one example, Bland and Sharma-Brymer (2012) used drawing and accompanying written narratives to explore learning environments and school design from a child's perspective. This was done to potentially help educators and planners identify what physical features of a school are

important to the children inhabiting the space. Year 5 and Year 6 students from nine primary schools in Queensland, Australia, created drawings for the Imagine a School project. The drawings were analyzed for “students’ choices of general environment, types of buildings and grounds, environmental considerations, and any special features, such as lakes and fountains, solar power, farms and gardens” (Bland and Sharma-Brymer 2012, 78). Several themes emerged from the drawings. The children requested that the schools possibly have physical features such as animal-related features (eg, petting zoo or farm), trees, plants and gardens, varying forms of water, and, for the male participants, elements of sports. Students also requested that schools be environmentally aware, with solar or wind power and climate control. The use of colour was also a key feature, and many students requested the presence of rainbows as an essential feature. The findings of this arts-based exploration “could result in the creation of learning spaces where more imaginative pedagogical relationships and student-centred pedagogical styles can be implemented” (Bland and Sharma-Brymer 2012, 83).

Another process that emerges from engagement in drawing is the concept of graphic–narrative play, as Wright (2007a) illustrates in her study. Through a meaningful drawing experience, children engage in self-narration (Wright 2007a), or cocreate narratives around the images drawn (Hallam, Lee and Das Gupta 2014). This self-narration continues the story or perspective that they are presenting on paper. Through graphic–narrative play, the child takes “on multiple roles – author, artist, director, scripter, performer and narrator. ... The child can select when and how to play with all the available voices offered through the multimodal media” (Wright 2007a, 2–3). In her work with two elementary schools, Wright (2007a) randomly selected 108 five- to eight-year-olds to participate in a drawing session and subsequent discussions about what the future will be like. The children were able to effectively draw their imagined futuristic worlds, and through ongoing narration and dialogue were able to bring meaning to what was represented. The children made intentional choices about what objects and events to include in their drawings (Wright 2007a, 2007b).

There is meaning and purpose to the marks that children put onto a page when they are drawing. Through drawing, children are free to express themselves, their identities (Literat 2013), interpretations, experiences and imaginations (Carter and Ford 2013). Their voice or viewpoint is represented in the drawing (Mand 2012) because

they are creating the visual image. By honouring the purpose or function of the drawing we can begin to understand the child’s goals in its original creation (Wright 2007b). “As observers, we need to be conscious that drawings can serve various purposes and functions; we must try to understand the young artist’s goals in relation to these” (Wright 2007b, 38).

## Arts-Based Research Through Mixed or Other Media in Educational Settings

Arts-based research with children and youth is not limited to the use of digital technology and drawing. It can also involve the use of sculpting, painting, drama, dance, mapping, construction, beading, stories, songs or poetry (Carter and Ford 2013; Frei 1999; Griebing 2011; Literat 2013; Kay 2013; Kirova and Emme 2008; O’Kane 2008; Wright 2007a) to express understanding and knowledge. As Kirova and Emme (2008) found in their study, photography lends itself quite readily to other forms of artistic expression. This is also the case for many arts-based research projects. Many times the artistic exploration is achieved through a mixture of artistic forms and media.

In one example, Mand worked for two years with one group of Bangladeshi children aged 9 to 10 in London to create art pieces representing their concepts of *home* and *away* for a final art exhibit. The children explored their understanding and interpretation of these concepts through sketches, printmaking, drawings and embroidery. “The choice of image that represented ‘home’ and ‘away’ was left entirely up to the children’s discretion and collectively speaking there was considerable variety in the images produced” (Mand 2012, 153). Through this exploration of mixed media the children began to develop and refine their understanding of *home* and *away* in relation to belonging, gender identities, forms of symbolic and material capital, and Bangladeshi culture.

Sonn, Grossman and Utomo used a participatory school-based arts program as a platform for youth from a refugee background to use photos, individual narratives and dance performances to tell their story and share their voice. This was part of an attempt to identify the refugees’ settlement experiences through the exploration of themes of well-being, belonging and inclusion, and their engagement with learning in the midst of their personal upheaval. Photo-elicitation allowed the participants to take photographs and select what they found to be important in their social worlds, and why it was personally meaningful (Sonn, Grossman and Utomo 2013). The use of arts-based education had a number of positive effects for the refugees, including greater social inclusion,

development of strong community relationships, and a sense of belonging and safety (Sonn, Grossman and Utomo 2013).

All of the examples presented above highlight the power of the arts. Individuals at any age, from any culture or background are able to choose the creative outlet that best reflects their thoughts, understandings, perspectives or outlooks. There is no right or wrong way to express such understandings, perspectives, thoughts or feelings through art. The process of their exploration through art involves (1) selection of the art medium to best reflect a thought or idea, (2) creation of the product and (3) explanation and reflection of the choices made. It is important to note that in using arts-based research in an educational setting the adult takes on the role of a facilitator (Wright 2007a).

[A]lthough students are working independently, the teacher in this approach is very active and engaged; she facilitates the process by setting parameters, giving guidelines, steering students toward information, ideas and sources of inspiration, and organizing group dialogues. All of these methods not only keep the process manageable and on-track, but also enable students to take their ideas way beyond expectations. (Marshall 2014, 18)

## Why Arts-Based Research Is Important

The results and findings generated from arts-based research with children and youth can add important knowledge to various disciplines. In the field of education, the outcomes and results of the research have the potential to affect the direction of educational policies, curriculum reform and provision of services (Alderson 2008; Bland and Sharma-Brymer 2012). Recognizing the role of children and youth also respects their rights (Alderson 2008), and this practice can continue to improve their position and influence within society. As with any research, limitations or hindrances can occur when children are not fully engaged or recognized as researcher or co-researcher. However, for children who truly participate in the role of researcher or co-researcher, some powerful, transformative processes occur. Through arts-based research, children are honoured as competent (Schulte 2011) and capable researchers. They are not actively or passively silenced or excluded because of perceived inexperience or immaturity (Alderson 2008). Rather, they have a voice and place in “both the artistic process and the development of product” (Gattenhof and Radvan 2009, 213) and a right to be involved in the decisions that will affect them (O’Kane 2008). This

process also allows children to select the creative outlet that best reflects them and to express their viewpoints (Griebling 2011).

These products can also represent a new truth (Mand 2012) or meaning as reflected in the art process and product. “Such open-ended, personal forms of knowing, expressing and communicating unleash and reveal children’s deep meaning, multiple perspective-taking and fluidity of thought” (Wright 2007a, 24). When children are given the opportunity to talk about their creations and subjective meanings (Kaoruko and Sjöberg 2012), the processes involved in complex decision making, information gathering and problem solving (Griebling 2011; Pavlou 2013) can also become apparent to all. Allowing children the opportunity to share in a social context with others is also important because this process has the potential to generate more accurate realities, as children may gain greater confidence to participate, speak and share their perspective (Barrett, Everett and Smigiel 2012). Engaging in arts-based research can also allow both children and outsiders to take on multiple perspectives and consider alternative positions or new truths (Mand 2012). Regarding children as competent and capable researchers also allows their voice, perspectives and insights to come to the forefront (Alderson 2008; Kirova and Emme 2008; Sonn, Grossman and Utomo 2013).

The use of art enables participants to tell their stories, construct new knowledge and express multifaceted meanings (Kay 2013). This can have a lasting impact on the individuals participating in the research process because they are empowered to manage their realities (Lee 2013). This can also occur for outsiders who experience the arts-based research secondarily. Arts-based research products are the personal stories and representations that belong to the individual; however, they can become a powerful symbol for those who can identify with the story (Kirova and Emme, 2008) being told or the themes that are being explored. Even viewing visual arts allows the development of creativity in thinking, and this permits the viewer to make connections and to think differently and innovatively (Pavlou 2013).

Although arts-based research continues to be a powerful instrument to successfully explore a variety of issues and themes, there can be constraints on the true representation or accuracy of the data presented. One of the limitations is a tendency to involve children for the appearance of involving them (Alderson 2008), and “even if children state that they feel involved, this does not automatically mean that they are actually part of the research process” (Kaoruko and Sjöberg 2012, 15). This



occurs when adult or outsider opinions, requirements, parameters or agendas determine what should be displayed, where to display the art and how to put the art together. When this occurs, the children's voices, experiences and perspectives become silenced or muted. In the event of a public exhibition or performance, the children can also be silenced if pieces and products are purposely excluded (Mand 2012). This could be because the pieces are thought to be of "poor" quality, or the children are considered vulnerable or lacking competence (Spyrou 2011). As a result, the art could "be edited, re-formulated or truncated to fit our agendas" (Roberts 2008, 264), leading to a misrepresentation or misreporting of the children's views (Alderson 2008).

## Classroom Applications and Conclusion

Using art is a powerful way to conduct research, investigate, inquire and explore the social and cultural contexts and lived realities of children within educational settings. It continues to grow in popularity because the child is viewed as a socially competent and capable individual (Popa and Stan 2013; Schulte 2011). The use of various forms of art provides even young children with an appropriate channel to express their insights and knowledge (Kirova and Emme 2008) and multiple ways of interpreting their world (Marshall 2014) and how they make meaning (Barone and Eisner 2012). Recognizing that the adult and the child are equals allows the child's perspectives, experiences and views to come to the forefront and be considered valid (Alderson 2008; Barrett, Everett and Smigiel 2012; Kirova and Emme 2008; Sonn, Grossman and Utomo 2013). Children then have the power to take on multiple perspectives, consider alternative positions and learn new truths (Mand 2012).

Through continued use of photography, drawing and mixed media in the classroom, young children can easily take on the role of researcher or co-researcher with greater flexibility in how they document and represent their thinking. There are several themes or ideas that educators could use as a starting point for facilitating arts-based research with young children (Marshall 2014). One possible theme could focus on the investigation of children's perspectives and opinions regarding their learning spaces or their imagined environments. Similarly to Popa and Stan's (2013) project, young children in the classroom could use digital photography to capture and represent what elements at school are important to them. A second broad theme could focus on examining the perspectives and

experiences of young children in their school life, social worlds, or connections between home and school. One way to do this would be to give the children a concept such as *school* or *home*, as Mand (2012) did, and have them use various forms of art to investigate what these ideas represent to them. Finally, a third theme might involve an exploration of identity, belonging or culture. Similarly to Mand's (2012) project, art explorations with young children could focus on what it means to belong, what their culture represents to them or how they view their identity. Each of these possible explorations through art can provide a way for young children to have their voices, experiences, ideas, viewpoints and perspectives heard and valued (Mand 2012; Spyrou 2011).

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# The Connection Between Art and Language: A Place for Multiple Literacies

*Vanessa Fraser and Heather Miller*

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Children need the freedom to appreciate the infinite resources of their hands, their eyes, and their ears, the resources of forms, materials, sounds and colours ... Creativity seems to emerge from multiple experiences, coupled with a well-supported development of personal resources, including a sense of freedom to venture beyond the known.

—Loris Malaguzzi

## The Connection Between Art and Language: A Place for Multiple Literacies

Young children draw on their senses in every experience. As their vocabulary grows, they develop a means to describe their experiences, learn from others and make connections.

As Malaguzzi<sup>1</sup> reminds us in his comments on Reggio philosophies (Edwards, Gandini and Forman 1993), through well-supported development of their own resources (hands, eyes, ears) and intentional structure of the environmental resources (forms, materials, sounds, colours), children can appreciate a deeper meaning from their experience, make

connections between themselves and the world around them, and commune with others within their shared experiences and environments (Edwards, Gandini and Forman 1993). With this intention in mind, we strive on a daily basis, as educators, to keep daily experiences lively and engaging for all of our students—using all of our senses—while supporting their language growth and development along the way.

The research question we aimed to answer through this classroom-based research project was “How do regular, intentional, one-on-one interview conversations with an adult assist students in growing in their ability to talk critically and reflectively about their artwork?” The following discussion will examine the pedagogical background behind our research, describe the process we followed and, finally, give concrete qualitative examples of our findings.

## Why Art and Language?

One of the daily pleasures of many young students lies in their abilities to create—whether construction of vehicles at the block centre, stories at dramatic play, shared communities in Lego, or drawings made to bestow upon those they love. Left unattended, children’s play and creation evolve within the parameters of their own skills and experiences. However, when their peers, environment or teachers give additional intention and attention to their processes, there can be dramatic growth as a result of these conversations and supports.

Such growth is a common experience for anyone engaging with art. For example, while visiting an art gallery, the viewer naturally wonders about the artists—their life stories, their communities, the stories they have to share. Similarly, as our youngest artists develop, we need to know more

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<sup>1</sup> Loris Malaguzzi (1920–94) was a 20th-century Italian early education specialist.