Young Children's Art Experiences: A Visual Ethnographic Study with Four Children in their Homes, Early Childhood Centre and Schools

Rosemary D. Richards
M. Ed. (1st Class Honours), Massey University, New Zealand
B Ed., Massey University, New Zealand
Dip. Tchg, Palmerston North College of Education, New Zealand

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the University of New England

2012
Acknowledgements

This study could not have been undertaken without the four children and their families who so willingly participated in the research. It has been a privilege to be part of these children’s lives. These children have been my teachers and my inspiration and their stories will stay with me throughout my life. I am also grateful for the full support given to me by the staff and families associated with the early childhood centre and the three schools involved in this research.

Dr. Margaret Brooks, my chief supervisor from University of New England, and Dr. Marian Court, from Massey University, have provided superb academic guidance. As my own journey has straddled two countries I have been enormously grateful for the wisdom, wit and warmth that these two exceptional people have given me over the years. Their joint efforts have been incredibly valuable and I could not have journeyed this research without them both. Thank you – may we have many reasons to share other journeys together in the years ahead.

My journey nearly came to an abrupt halt in 2007. I literally owe my life to Mr Adriaan Grobbelaar’s surgical team, and to Dr. Barbara Bannister and her team at Royal Free Hampstead Hospital, London. I’d also like to acknowledge Geoff Coldham, of Mercy Hospital, Auckland, whose surgical skills rescued me from 10 years of acute back pain. These people remind me how important it is that people care enough to become experts in their fields.

I am also grateful to Massey University, and Prof. James Chapman, for the two-year PVC’s International Fellowship that allowed me to work in Australia on my research, and a subsequent Advanced Degree Award which enabled me to take some dedicated time for writing. During these times my arts colleagues have supported me in a range of ways. Specifically I’d like to acknowledge Rei Hendry, Dr. Jenny Boyack, Judith Donaldson, Tracy-Lynne Cody and Paul Hansen. I’d also like to acknowledge the support and encouragement of my friends and colleagues Dr. Angela Ward and Dr. Kathy Danko-McGhee, with a special thanks to Dr. Barbara Jordan who was my critical friend and eagle-eyed reader of my final draft. Thank you for your support.

Thank you Ash, my husband - you’ve always believed in me! We changed countries, and you supported me through good health and bad, joined in my good
humour and propped me up when I got dispirited. You loved me without question. You’ve
travelled with me to art conferences and become part of the scene of early childhood art.
This thesis is your journey too. There are no words to adequately express my love and
gratitude. To my wonderful daughter Janelle - thank you. Your loyalty knows no bounds. I
look forward to more girl-time together. To my cat Cyrille, thanks for listening and being
my constant companion. You alone may miss the long hours spent writing.

This thesis is dedicated to my parents Ann and Neville Gillum, and to my siblings,
Stephen, Marcus, Michael and Kirsty.
Abstract

This thesis re-presents four young Australian children’s experiences of art in their homes, early childhood and beginning school settings. The research involves two boys and two girls who, equipped with digital cameras, took photographs of their art experiences over a ten month period. Through sensitive interactions between the researcher and the children, and research methodologies associated with narrative inquiry and visual ethnography, each child’s photographs and discussions generated the co-constructed research data. The children’s perspectives take prominence in the findings, and Deweyan and Vygotskian sociocultural-historical perspectives inform an understanding of their art experiences. This research is accessible to practitioners and allows for an empathetic reading which may then lead to important pedagogical insights and developments for early childhood and beginning school art education.

Deweyan perspectives on art as experience contributed to a deeper understanding of the nature of children’s art experience, children’s spontaneous art, their exploration of big ideas through art, and the temporal dimensions of their art experiences. Art experiences in which challenges were acknowledged and overcome acted as important moments in children’s artistic development. Children used art to provide for themselves in terms of games, learning experiences and cultural artifacts. Through art experiences they made sense of history and change, linked events, places and people, recorded aspects of the world around them, and met emotional needs. Through art children transformed materials into art media and solitary play experiences into vibrant intrapersonal dialogues. Through art they transformed their understandings of the world around them, and transformed interaction into participation and communication with others.

This study also noted that in order to engage in satisfying art experiences children required conditions of some uninterrupted time, uncontested space, some tolerance of noise and also some contemplative silence. Children also required ready access to art materials and their artworks. Social interactions were vital to fullness of art experience and while children actively sought social interactions through art they also benefited from the presence of interested but unobtrusive others. As such, children’s art experiences were a mix of public and private times.
In terms of the context for art experience, however, there was often a mismatch between the level of complexity of art experiences at home, preschool and school with children often showing greatest competence at home. In educational contexts, fulfilling art experiences were promoted or constrained by perceived safety issues, teacher-child ratios, time allocations, curriculum expectations, and teachers’ beliefs about art, children’s artistic competencies and learning. In all settings, the way the children experienced art spaces was of more significance to the nature of their art experiences than the physical characteristics of such spaces.

This study contributes towards locally-based and international research concerned with young children’s experiences of art in their homes and educational settings. At a theoretical level it contributes to Deweyan and Vygotskian sociocultural-historical perspectives and research as understood in the 21st century. It contributes towards knowledge advancement in early childhood and primary education, art and art education, teaching and learning, parenting, home-based learning, and aesthetic theory and education. It also provides specific insights into the NSW Australian curriculum and practices in early childhood and beginning school contexts and has some relevance to New Zealand art and early childhood pedagogical practices. At a methodological level this qualitative research contributes towards co-constructivist paradigms, arts-based methodologies, narrative inquiry, visual ethnography, and contemporary ethnographic studies. It also expands on collaborative research with young children, children’s camera use and positive adult-child research relationships.
Candidate's certification

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis and all sources used have been acknowledged in this thesis.

Rosemary D. Richards
# Table of contents

PART ONE: SETTING THE SCENE FOR THE RESEARCH AND INTRODUCING THE THESIS ....................................................................................................................... 1

1. BEGINNINGS .......................................................................................................................... 1
   Beginnings remembered and re-experienced ........................................................................ 1
   Exploring my place within the landscape ............................................................................... 4
   Introducing the thesis structure .............................................................................................. 8

2. EARLY CHILDHOOD ART: LITERATURE, RESEARCH AND THEORY ............. 11
   Mapping historical landscapes of early childhood art................................................ 12
      Historical Beginnings ........................................................................................................... 12
      20th Century Landscapes .................................................................................................... 14
   Signposts on contemporary landscapes of early childhood art ................................. 22
      Reggio Emilia....................................................................................................................... 22
   Vygotsky's perspective and early childhood art ................................................................. 24
   Child-initiated art and purposes for art ................................................................................... 28
   Adults' beliefs and attitudes about children's art ................................................................. 29
   Children's self-beliefs about drawing and art ....................................................................... 31
   Children's art experiences in homes, centres and schools .................................................. 34
   Expanding the landscape ................................................................................................. 37

3. DEWEY'S PERSPECTIVES ON ART AS EXPERIENCE ..................................... 39
   John Dewey: A brief history ...................................................................................... 40
   Dewey’s book: Art as experience.............................................................................. 40
   Art and everyday life .......................................................................................................... 42
   The nature of art experience ............................................................................................. 48
   Recognition and perception ................................................................................................. 48
   Uniting perception and action............................................................................................... 50
   Art media and subject-matter ............................................................................................... 51
   Artistic expression ................................................................................................................ 51
   Brief overview of children's art experience ....................................................................... 54

4. RESEARCH PROCESSES ................................................................................... 57
   Research methodologies .......................................................................................... 57
   Research paradigm .............................................................................................................. 57
   Research approaches .......................................................................................................... 60
   Research Methods ................................................................................................................ 71
   Preparation for fieldwork ................................................................................................. 71
   Ethics approval processes ................................................................................................... 72
   Selection of participants ....................................................................................................... 72
   Timeframes .......................................................................................................................... 74
   Fieldwork: Children’s use of cameras and research visits .................................................... 75
   Research relationships and ethical practices ....................................................................... 77
   Considering perspectives on children, research and theory ................................................. 78
   Role negotiation with and by child participants ................................................................. 80
   Relationships develop and change ..................................................................................... 82
   Ethical research, ethical research relationships .................................................................... 84
   Data analysis and interpretations ......................................................................................... 85
   Use of art terminology .......................................................................................................... 87
   Summary .............................................................................................................................. 88
Jackson starts school ............................................................................................. 263

12. JACKSON ......................................................................................................... 263

Lilly's other art experiences .................................................................................... 258

Sophie's participation and communication through art ........................................... 255

Jackson's art experiences ...................................................................................... 263

Lilly's and Sophie's art experiences ........................................................................ 235

Lee's art experiences .............................................................................................. 217

Lee starts school..................................................................................................... 217

Lee's art experiences .............................................................................................. 217

Home art exhibition ................................................................................................ 217

Art-related activities at school ............................................................................... 219

Lee's art lesson ........................................................................................................ 224

Flow between home and school art experiences ..................................................... 226

Artmaking to generate an artifact ........................................................................... 228

Lee's sources of ideas for art .................................................................................. 230

Lee's art in the final weeks of research .................................................................... 231

10. LEE ................................................................................................................... 217

11. LILLY AND SOPHIE .......................................................................................... 235

Lilly and Sophie start school ................................................................................... 235

Lilly's and Sophie's art experiences ....................................................................... 235

Lilly's and Sophie's involvement in art-related activities ........................................ 235

Lilly's and Sophie's art lessons .............................................................................. 249

Sophie's participation and communication through art ......................................... 255

Last words from Sophie and her mother ................................................................. 257

Lilly's other art experiences ................................................................................... 258

Last words from Lilly .............................................................................................. 262

12. JACKSON ......................................................................................................... 263

Jackson starts school ............................................................................................. 263

Jackson's art experiences ...................................................................................... 263

Jackson's early art experiences ............................................................................. 263

Doing it the right way ............................................................................................. 264

Jackson's Photography ........................................................................................... 266

Jackson drawing at home ....................................................................................... 267

Jackson’s block, wood and box constructions....................................................... 269

Jackson’s communication about and through art ................................................... 272

Jackson’s art-related activities at school ................................................................. 273

Jackson’s art lessons ............................................................................................... 274

Jackson’s art at home .............................................................................................. 278

Last words from Jackson ....................................................................................... 279

13. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS ................................................. 281

Conclusions and Implications ............................................................................... 281

Spontaneous art ..................................................................................................... 282

Art spaces, materials and resources ....................................................................... 284

Exploring big ideas through art ............................................................................. 288

Supporting children’s art experiences: Attitudes and interactions ....................... 289
Art-related activities in the classroom ................................................................. 290
Artistic development over time ........................................................................... 291
Art experiences are transformative ..................................................................... 292

RECOMMENDATIONS ......................................................................................... 293
Provision of spaces and resources ........................................................................ 293
Understanding children’s ‘funds of knowledge’ through art ..................................... 294
Art experience and ESOL children ......................................................................... 294
Regular drawing experiences based on child-initiated topics ....................................... 295
Talking with children, listening and seeing ............................................................... 295
Becoming an interested audience for children’s talk about art ....................................... 296
Expanding types and formats of art ........................................................................ 296
Art as joint experience ........................................................................................... 296
Collaborations, experts and novices ....................................................................... 297
Children’s photography and photographs ................................................................. 297
Getting schools ready for children ......................................................................... 298
Supporting children’s artistic risk taking ................................................................. 298

Suggestions for further research ........................................................................... 299
Contributions, strengths and limitations ................................................................ 300

Contributions to the field ....................................................................................... 300
Strengths of the study .............................................................................................. 301
Limitations of the study ............................................................................................ 302

Concluding comments ........................................................................................... 302

REFERENCES ......................................................................................................... 305

APPENDICES .......................................................................................................... 319
Appendix A: Information sheet for the parents and staff at preschool ......................... 319
Appendix B: Consent form for participating preschool staff ......................................... 322
Appendix C: Consent form for parent/s of key participants .......................................... 323
Appendix D: Consent form for children: Observations and conversations ...................... 324
Appendix E: Consent form for children: Photographs and videos .................................... 325
Appendix F: Initial letter/email to schools ................................................................... 326
Appendix G: Information sheet for principals and teachers .......................................... 327
Appendix H: DET (SERAP) research approval letter .................................................... 330
Appendix I: Research names for participants and places ............................................... 331
Appendix J: Letter to parents confirming key participants ............................................. 332
Appendix K: Letter to parents confirming non-key participants ..................................... 333
Appendix L: Letter to schools confirming participation ................................................. 334
Appendix M: Letter to schools confirming non-participation ........................................ 335
Appendix N: Information Sheet for parents in participating preschool ............................ 336
Appendix O: Consent form for children in participants’ preschool ................................. 338
Appendix P: Information Sheet for parents of children in schools .................................. 339
Appendix Q: Consent form for parents and children in participants’ class ....................... 341
Appendix R: Consent form for school principal ........................................................... 342
Appendix S: Consent form for school teachers ............................................................ 343
## Table of figures

Figure 1. Dedicated and changing art spaces at preschool ........................................... 91
Figure 2. Craft table (top); block area; home corner; sandpit ......................................... 92
Figure 3. Drawing and studying maps ........................................................................... 97
Figure 4. Lee’s game-drawing with stickers .................................................................... 98
Figure 5. Lee’s floor game and castle-game drawing .................................................... 99
Figure 6. Shark computer-game drawing; Battleship computer ................................... 100
Figure 7. Lee’s map; laptop computer ......................................................................... 104
Figure 8. Laptop computer ........................................................................................... 106
Figure 9. Transformer worksheet; princess activity sheet ............................................ 107
Figure 10. Poster for Chinese language lessons ............................................................ 108
Figure 11. Drawings that explored good and evil ............................................................ 110
Figure 12. ‘Bob’s Farm, Farmer Bob’ title page ............................................................. 115
Figure 13. Bob’s farm house; green and orange sheep. Pages 1-2.............................. 115
Figure 14. The green sheep runs away. Pages 3-4 ....................................................... 116
Figure 15. Only two sheep; Bob is alarmed. Pages 5-6 ................................................ 117
Figure 16. Bob looks for the green sheep. Pages 7-8 .................................................... 118
Figure 17. Bob climbs a hill; Bob meets Garfield. Pages 9-10 ....................................... 118
Figure 18. Bob needs a map; Bob meets a shark. Pages 11-12 ..................................... 119
Figure 19. Bob at hat shop; Bob at police station. Pages 13-14 .................................... 120
Figure 20. Bob and a policeman search. Pages 15-16 .................................................. 121
Figure 21. Bob and police search; green sheep comes home. Pages 17-18 .................... 121
Figure 22. Drawing on the whiteboard; drawing of learning time scene ...................... 127
Figure 23. Selection of Lee’s drawings with a family theme ........................................ 128
Figure 24. Summer holiday drawings ........................................................................... 129
Figure 25. Destroyer; Plant Monsters .......................................................................... 130
Figure 26. ‘I’m starting school’ poster; Lee’s own version ............................................ 131
Figure 27. Drawing comprising several drawing episodes ........................................... 136
Figure 28. Lilly’s drawing as several drawing episodes ................................................. 137
Figure 29. Home and family-based construction projects ............................................ 138
Figure 30. Drawings of family scenes and domestic life ............................................. 140
Figure 31. Observational drawing; practicing drawing techniques ............................... 144
Figure 32. School bus; school bags; bus with children and aliens ................................ 146
Figure 33. Preschool craft activities with visiting grandmothers .................................. 147
Figure 34. Lilly and her sister’s drawing of families; Lilly’s drawing of sisters ............. 149
Figure 35. Dorothy as a girl; Dorothy as a mother; Dorothy as an old woman ............. 150
Figure 36. ‘Wizard of Oz’ drawings ............................................................................ 152
Figure 37. Drawing shoes on feet; working page on dresses ....................................... 153
Figure 38. Angry at bedtime; adding to the building plan .......................................... 154
Figure 39. Mermaid drawings; miniature drawn plan .................................................. 157
Figure 40. Sophie’s artworks from previous preschool .............................................. 160
Figure 41. Sophie’s block camera; photographs of patterns and designs ..................... 162
Figure 42. Preschool art: Bird feet pattern; collage and dye; creating a necklace ...... 164
Figure 43. Mummy with decoration hair; rainbow ...................................................... 165
Figure 44. Triangle boat; decorative pattern ............................................................... 166
Figure 45. Sophie’s bird sign; decorating a box ........................................................... 167
Figure 46. Sophie and her sister visit the art gallery .................................................... 170
Figure 47. Jackson’s wooden ladder; sword; table ....................................................... 176
Figure 98. Groovy grapes: Lilly’s (left); Sophie’s (right). ............................................... 254
Figure 99. Sophie painting; Painting of her mother; brother with rainbow hair .......... 255
Figure 100. Sophie’s home-based art: Painting on canvas; drawing an Easter card ... 256
Figure 101. Lilly’s drawings: love; marriage; pregnancy. .............................................. 258
Figure 102. Lilly: School girls; Pocahontas; square writing and drawing. ................. 259
Figure 103. Lilly’s D is for duck; caterpillars................................................................. 260
Figure 104. Lilly’s drawings of Sophie’s family............................................................. 261
Figure 105. Jackson: coloured-in cake; paper snake; crane........................................... 263
Figure 106. Dad drawn on Magna-doodle; Mother’s day card. ..................................... 267
Figure 107. Drawings: Bush; Sydney Harbour Bridge celebrations. ............................ 268
Figure 108. Jackson’s fishing boat drawing; actual model........................................ 268
Figure 109. Small block constructions (left, centre); chicken cross (right). ................. 270
Figure 110. Airport terminal and plane; Titanic. ......................................................... 271
Figure 111. Zoobs construction; subsequent modelling and drawing. .......................... 272
Figure 112. Art-type activities in Jackson’s classroom.................................................. 274
Figure 113. ‘Cat on the mat’ art lesson. ......................................................................... 275
Figure 114. Jackson’s Easter art-and-craft activities. .................................................. 276
Figure 115. Portraits of mothers. ................................................................................. 277
Figure 116. Jackson’s home-based art: Planes and rockets. ....................................... 278
Figure 117. Art at home: bookmark; Meccano crane; collages; wood constructions. .... 278
Figure 118. Messerschmitt; pears in crayon and dye; Jackson as photographer. ........ 279