

Exploring a range of unconventional research methods and considering how these can be used effectively in practice, this accessible textbook encourages the use of innovative approaches to conduct research in early years contexts.

Using Innovative Methods in Early Years Research provides key information on a range of non-traditional research methods, and details the strengths, limitations and challenges involved in diverging from more standard research methods. From researching with young children, practitioners and parents, to harnessing the arts, vignettes, identity boxes and narrative accounts, chapters draw on authors' first-hand experiences to highlight the value of 'thinking outside the box' and developing innovative research methods that meet the needs and aims of the researcher, while also involving and empowering research participants. Including detailed information on ethical concerns and the importance of reflexivity, individual and group tasks encourage students to take a critical and well-thought-out approach to conducting independent research.

This will be an invaluable and inspiring resource for high-level undergraduate and postgraduate students as they embark on research projects in the field of early years education and care.

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EDUCATION

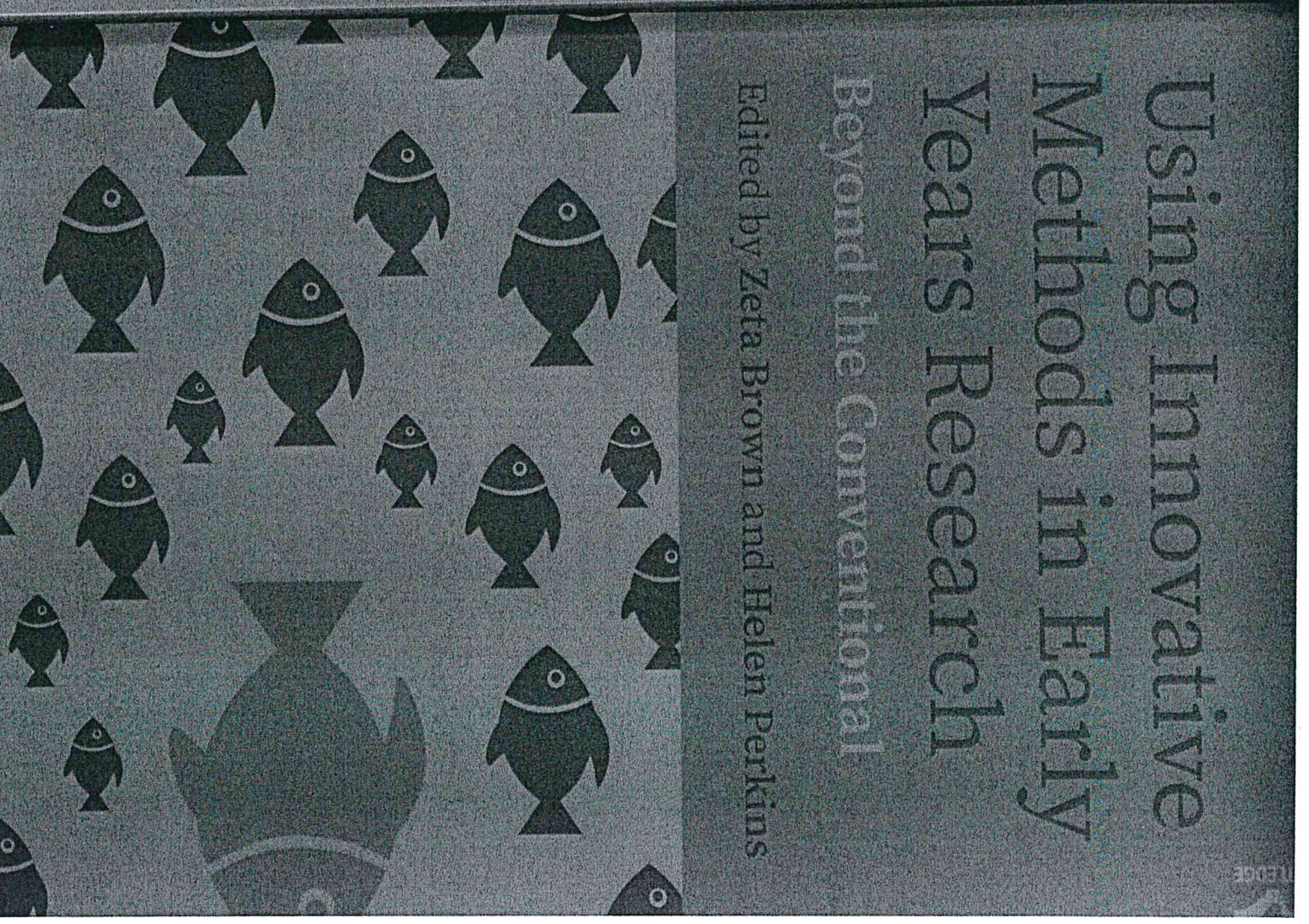
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Using Innovative Methods in Early Years Research Beyond the Conventional

Edited by Zeta Brown and Helen Perkins

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group

an informa business
ISBN 978-1-138-38951-9

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 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2019
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an Informa business
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individual chapters, the contributors

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Names: Brown, Zeta, editor. | Perkins, Helen (Helen Marie), 1957- editor.
Title: Using innovative methods in early years research : beyond the
conventional / edited by Zeta Brown and Helen Perkins.
Description: Abingdon, Oxon : New York, NY : Routledge, 2019. |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019001902 (print) | LCCN 2019009883 (ebook) | ISBN
9780429423871 (pbk) | ISBN 9781138389502 (hbk) : alk. paper | ISBN
9781138389519 (pbk) : alk. paper | ISBN 9780429423871 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Early childhood education—Research—Methodology.
Classification: LCC LB139.225 (ebook) | LCC LB139.225 .U75 2019
(print) | DDC 372.21—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019001902>

ISBN: 978-1-138-38950-2 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-138-38951-9 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-0-429-42387-1 (ebk)

Typeset in Melior
by Swales & Willits Ltd, Exeter, Devon, UK

Zeta Brown

For my amazing children: Mia, Damie and Fin

And my very supportive parents: Sue and John

Helen Perkins

For my wonderfully supportive husband Rob and my
children Fiona and James

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Abbreviations

BA	Bachelor of Arts
BEEL	baby effective early Learning
BERA	British Education Research Association
BESA	British Education Studies Association
CATE	Collaborative Award for Teaching Excellence
CREC	Centre for Research in Early Childhood
DfE	Department for Education
ECE	early childhood education
ECFC	early childhood education and care
ECS	early childhood studies
EECERA	European Early Childhood Education Research Association
EEL	Effective Early Learning Project
EYPP	Early Years Pupil Premium
FE	further education
GB	Gigabyte
GCSSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
HE	higher education
HEA	Higher Education Academy
ICT	information and communications technology
ITET	Initial Teacher Education or Training
LA	local authority
LOtC	learning outside of the classroom
PE	physical education
PVI	Private, Voluntary and Independent

REDO reveal, examine, dismantle, open
 SEN special educational needs
 SIG special interest group
 UCL University College London
 UK United Kingdom
 UNCRC United Nations Convention on the Rights of
 the Child

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PART II

Researching with children

4

Art as a method of research

Elisabetta Biffi and Franca Zucchi

Introduction

The fact that art, images, drawing, and the use of expressive materials feature strongly in the lives of young children scarcely requires confirmation, yet it is borne out by numerous studies (Boone, 2008; Twigg and Garvis, 2010; Wright, 2012) and the everyday observations of early childhood education practitioners. Nevertheless, realising the full potential of the artistic dimension – which is so specific to human development – is quite a different matter. In this chapter, we explore the value of the artistic and expressive medium for children and adults in research, first in general, then as a resource for enhancing communication and relationships, and finally as a domain of inquiry and discovery that can span a diverse range of disciplinary areas.

We also examine art as a mode of research, in terms of art-based research and art-informed research paradigms (Knowles and Cole, 2008), and specifically in relation to educational contexts. Shifting from a model of everyday educational practice in which children's drawings and artistic-expressive productions are a recurrent feature but seen as offering few insights from a research perspective, to a model of inquiry that uses art as a medium through which to document, reflect, and conduct research, represents a crucial new departure that, however, is not yet perceived as a priority.

INDIVIDUAL/GROUP TASK

Before you read this chapter, consider how you would define the role of the arts in early childhood education. How would you define art-based inquiry?

Reflections on art and children: art in early childhood education

Educationalists, as well as artists, educators and teachers, have debated the role of art education both in early childhood education settings and at all subsequent levels of schooling. The most frequently recurring question is whether art may be taught or not, an issue that derives from a broader and even longer-standing discussion among philosophers, aesthetes and artists concerning the definability of art. Without attempting to engage in depth with this difficult question, we formulate some positions here that are also salient to our subsequent treatment of art as a mode of inquiry, especially in the humanities. The first of these propositions is informed by the thinking of philosopher and art critic Dino Formaggio (1973), who said that 'Art is all that men call Art' (p. 9). At first glance, this definition appears to be a mere tautology. In reality, however, it releases us from the obligation to classify art, brings back into question the criteria applied during the various historic periods, and situates the work of art in its concrete realisation. With regard to the possibility of art education, scholars have expressed a range of strongly divergent views: from those who advocate direct artistic experience for children, such as John Dewey (1995), to those who design art activities to be carried out in a context of play (Munari, 2004), and from those who see art as a vehicle for education across a range of disciplines, as proposed by Herbert Read (1958), to those who, like Arno Stern (1966), conceptualise an individual activity that does not necessarily need to be shared with others, draws on individual unconscious memory, demands a dedicated time and space, and follows a developmental trajectory.

The words of John Dewey (1995) suggest that art bears immense potential to reveal hidden meanings, other than those that are already known and shared:

Through art, meanings of objects that are otherwise dumb, inchoate, restricted and resisted are clarified and concentrated, and not by thought working laboriously upon them, nor by escape into a world of mere sense, but by creation of a new experience. (p. 154)

Elsewhere in Dewey's seminal text *Art as Experience*, as well as in a vast body of articles devoted to this theme, we find further references to the power of art to fulfil exploratory, cognitive, communicative and social functions, provided that we take it as direct experience to be engaged with (in Dewey's view, this principle holds true for both children and adults), so he writes:

Art [...] intercepts every shade of expressiveness found in objects and orders them in a new experience of life. Because objects of art are expressive, they communicate. I do not say that communication to others is the intent of the artist. But it is the consequence of his work – which indeed lives only in communication when it operates in the experience of others. (Dewey, 1995: 121–122)

The characteristics of art that we have briefly outlined must be borne in mind, both when engaging children in art activities and when conducting art-based research; in sum, it is especially important that art should remain active, consumable and experimental. This is the value that springs from artistic experience, which is aesthetic experience involving the perception and enjoyment of beauty, but above all active experience engaging the person in practical action and reflection. Dewey argued that the formative power of art lies precisely in this experiential dimension, with its communicative and imaginative valence. He repeatedly affirmed that children need to engage in constant intense activity that is constructive, elicits their personal involvement, and is in continuous evolution. Dewey's emphasis on practical work and reflection made him one of the first to theorise the key value of artistic experiences such as painting, drawing, modelling, music, drama and play, which in his day were just beginning to gain acceptance as part of the school curriculum. One possible approach to implementing this theory was to design laboratories that would foster a virtuous loop between theory and practice.

Similarly, Herbert Read claimed that for the child, reality is a total organic experience, and that educating through art constitutes an integral experience, a means of satisfying the desire for exploration and knowledge. He posited a primitive aesthetic impulse that may be educated and preserved, and that develops, underpinning the need to educate through art and in art.

Read's theories have been used as bases for some teacher training courses that took place between 2015 and 2016 at the Pirelli HangarBicocca centre for contemporary art, in accordance with the educational division (Trovalusci et al., 2017). The chosen exhibits, 'Hypothesis' by Philippe Parreno and 'Doubt' by Carsten Höller, included immersive environments, with numerous sensorial and mental stimulations, that asked for the direct participation of the public. The teachers visited the exhibition before it was totally set up, and art was used as a bridge to experiment many fields that could have then been used with students. At the same time, teachers benefited from the artistic languages, also exploring, living and producing them, thanks to the continuous coming and going from one exhibition setting to another. Living in direct contact with the artistic objects forced the teachers to use different artistic techniques and measure themselves with non-logic and non-linear languages, but complex ones. In this way, they rediscovered the possibilities of investigating and researching. This artistic research, which did not necessary take place with the same artistic language used by the artist, created the opportunity to deepen the possibilities of exploring. Painting, collage, tridimensional constructions, photocollage and photomontage are some of the instruments used to shape thoughts and proposals. The same creative opportunity, lived as a constant search, consequently relapsed on the children involved. As researchers, thanks to the produced material and reflections, to the video and photo documentation, we were given the opportunity to think about the power of research inside a contemporary art centre, in contact with the artwork, behind the scenes of the artwork, while it was being set up. Coming back to the drawings of children, we can observe that they have the characteristics of proper research that uses art in order to investigate and learn about the world. In a number of international contributions (Barrett and Bolt, 2010; Biggs and Karlsson, 2014), the use of art in early childhood education research is a modality used according to different perspectives. Here are some of them: art as an

instrument for data collection, as a reflection modality, as an element to reproject, and as a possibility to explore and communicate.

INDIVIDUAL/GROUP TASK

What artistic practices may be used in early childhood education settings? And with what aims in mind?

Art as a method of research in early childhood education

While art may be seen as a process of inquiry in its own right, even when executed for purely artistic purposes, 'art-based research' means something more specific than this. McNiff (2008) has defined it as the 'systematic use of the artistic process, as a primary way of understanding and examining experience' (p. 29). Art-based methods do not merely entail collecting artistic data with a view to analysing them alongside other forms of data. In art-based research, the artistic process itself constitutes the primary mode of inquiry throughout any given study, from the production of the data through sharing the findings. To successfully apply art-based methods, researchers must possess advanced understanding of the artistic process and training in the artistic technique(s) adopted during the research process.

However, for the purposes of this chapter, we hone in on another perspective, known as art-informed research (Knowles and Cole, 2008). In this case, art is viewed as a specific language through which participants can express themselves, facilitating the elicitation of meanings and thoughts that can remain unexpressed when only verbal data are gathered. However, art-informed methods do not only concern the data collection phase; rather, the term 'art-informed' implies a strategic decision on the part of the researcher to adopt a qualitative or mixed method of inquiry (Archibald and Gerber, 2018) that is informed by the arts. To put this another way, it is as though the research method is observed through the filter of the arts.

Children's drawings have long been a focus of research interest, especially in relation to children's cognitive development and their

representations of the world (as in Diem-Wille, 2012), and they have also been used to study children's textual comprehension and literacy (as in Kendrick and McKay, 2004). In general, art can offer a privileged mode of inquiry in early childhood education settings, particularly given that children's language ability is still developing during early childhood. The language of art also facilitates work in multicultural settings, where not only is it challenging to communicate verbally with the children, due to their level of development, but also difficulty can arise in communicating with the parents, whose native language, for example, may be different to that of the researcher. In such multilingual contexts, strategically introducing an artistic medium allows thoughts to be translated into a universe that is accessible to both parents and researchers, and in which the children too feel comfortable. Hence, drawing on artistic techniques to enrich one's research method has the potential to become an extremely powerful mode of inquiry within early childhood education settings.

Of course, art in this context is not limited to one expressive form. Rather, the potential, through art, to give voice to multiple and diverse languages and to access different forms of knowledge is of great democratic value in that it accommodates children's 'hundred languages' (Edwards et al., 2012), allowing each individual child to express him or herself. For the teacher, this means giving voice to those who would otherwise remain unheard. The different artistic forms enabling expression of the self and of one's thoughts (not just drawing, but also dance, sculpture, music and song) ensure that the teacher-researcher can reach everyone. This represents a key opportunity, not only in scientific terms, but also at the ethical level, especially in our contemporary era when much of children's learning occurs outside of the educational setting and is in preliterate form (see the influence of digital devices, which are increasingly available to very young children long before they start primary school or learn how to read and write). Advancing our understanding of how children construct knowledge and the most effective strategies for promoting learning means exploring alternative learning processes based on oral, visual and kinaesthetic cultures. In one of her works, Patricia T. Whitfield (2008) warned that concentrating too much on literacy skills, combined with the exclusion of the arts as a learning strategy, risks leading to the exclusion of many children:

Yet, children come to know in a multitude of ways and those whose roots lie in oral, visual or kinaesthetic cultures are placed at a disadvantage when their first experiences with schooling are bereft of joy and individual expression related to their cultural roots. (p. 153)

The same principle applies to our knowledge of educational strategies in early childhood education. If we only attend to one mode of learning (associated with a given univocal understanding of how this learning is displayed), we risk overlooking all that might come to light on using other forms of exploration. Artistic approaches to research can foster the emergence of other meanings of knowledge, enriching our scientific understanding of early childhood and pointing out alternative forms of thinking. Within the wide range of possible ways of using art in educational research, we now focus on two potential applications: research with young children and research conducted by teachers/educators on their own professional practice.

INDIVIDUAL/GROUP TASK

How can art and an artistic perspective contribute to research in early childhood education?

Art as a research strategy when working with children

Many authors, including art critics, artists, educationalists, intellectuals and philosophers, have proposed that art is a research strategy in itself. Specifically, the artistic mode of action and reflection facilitates exploration of the complexity and non-linearity of human experience by using preverbal and/or sensory, aesthetic forms of data. It is a process of inquiry engaged in by the artist with a view to illuminating, rather than corroborating or explicating, a given phenomenon. Notably, this perspective on the use of art in research has been made explicit by Graeme Sullivan (2010), who argues that the contemporary world demands an alternative mode of research, one that conserves the complexity of reality,

following the logic of transformative practice: 'I realize] that in an uncertain world there is a need to develop more widespread means of exploring human comprehension and that visual arts can play a key role' (p. xxii). Thus, art's inherent potential is attributed with peculiar value as a means of inquiring into our complex contemporary world, which we can never fully observe or understand if we restrict ourselves to a single channel of inquiry, all the less if this channel is binary, logical and rational. Crucially, our use here of the term 'art' is informed by the definition and meaning of art proposed by Herbert Read (1958):

Art is one of those things that just like the oxygen and the soil are everywhere around us. We almost never think about it, though. That is why art is not something that can be only found in museums and art galleries or in old cities like Florence and Rome. Art, regardless of how we define it, is present in everything we do to please the senses. (p. 2)

Within the broader paradigm of art as a means of researching complexity, we may make the following specific observation concerning children. Careful observation of their evolving artistic productions in early childhood education settings suggests that in environments that have been meaningfully designed for them by adults, and unless firmly guided by the teacher to strive for likeness, realism or a set outcome, children often try out original approaches to their artwork, exploring previously uncharted territory. Such a tendency may be observed even in the simplest forms of children's artistic expression, such as their drawings. This is the line of inquiry pursued by scholar Claire Golomb (2004) in *Children's Art in Context*. In this work, as penetratingly remarked by Gabriella Gilli (2004), Golomb observed children's drawings and three-dimensional artwork from an interactionist and constructionist perspective, in order not to fall into the risk of absolutising and quantifying the aesthetic perspective. According to the interactionist and constructionist perspective, the production and sharing of artistic artefacts, which has characterised all ages, is a privileged form of 'meaning-making'. It connects the individual mind with the social context, but also the artists and the consumers (Gilli, 2004: vii).

As remarked in the previous paragraph, drawing may be analysed in relation to any or all of its countless potentials, including as a medium for experimentation, exploration and engaging with the challenges of working with the materials. Here, inquiry is not a secondary factor. Indeed, artistic expression that cultivates the dimensions of experimentation and reflection is a key component of the educational event as an instrument of learning (Cahmann-Taylor and Siegesmund, 2008). However, in formal educational settings such as schools, the potential of art to shed light on subjects' knowledge construction processes is all too frequently underestimated. Conventionally, observation has mainly focused on the reproductive and objective aspects of children's artwork, rather than on the discoveries, divergent perspectives and knowledge transitions inherent in their spontaneous drawings.

An excellent example of putting artistic language at the service of research with children is the mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2001), in which intervention is permeated by a spirit of inquiry, and both practitioners and (above all) children are invited to act as researchers. The key purpose here is to receive and record children's thoughts and knowledge about other children (from a 'children about children' perspective), an approach that was applied by Langsted (1994) in the *Children as Citizens* project. For example, inviting children to take photographs allows life in early education to be observed from the children's own perspective: a perspective that the adult, whether teacher or researcher, could not otherwise access, but only formulate hypotheses about. Directly involving the children by deploying the language of photography not only implies recognising the child as competent, but also prompts the adult to be more attentive and to observe things from a different, non-adult perspective (Moran, 2009). When photography is viewed as an artistic language, the aesthetic dimension of a picture becomes an integral part of the research 'data', to be shared and discussed with the children themselves. Independently of what a photograph actually represents, it is the outcome of a process of selecting and producing a particular shot: this process is in itself a form of inquiry that should be valued as part of a broader artistic path.

INDIVIDUAL/GROUP TASK

What educational offerings, and what materials and tools, encourage expressive inquiry on the part of children?

Art as a research strategy for teachers

The work of early education practitioners invariably takes the form of inquiry. These teachers are called to constantly reflect on their own work and actions, and to critically question their own behaviours and interactions with the children. Visual artistic language also serves as a mediator of meanings, enabling educators and teachers to share thoughts and feelings with the children, as well as the rules of everyday life at the early childhood centre (one example is marking cupboards with symbols rather than verbal labels).

Thus, in addition to allowing children to independently explore the meanings of their experiences, and to facilitating researchers' construction of knowledge, art can also inform the ways in which teachers can reflect on their own work. In the words of Eliot Eisner (2002):

Work in the arts is not only a way of creating performances and products; it is a way of creating our lives by expanding our consciousness, shaping our dispositions, satisfying our quest for thinking, establishing contact with others and sharing a culture. (p. 3)

An excellent example is the use of artistic languages in pedagogical documentation. Pedagogical documentation itself, when conceptualised as a process of inquiry (Rinaldi, 2006), offers the potential to construct original paths of knowledge that bring into question not only the children's educational experience, but also how practitioners experience their encounter with the children. This in turn enables educators and teachers to revisit their own beliefs and perceptions, thereby adopting a research stance.

For example, collage has been used, within a broader working path, to help early childhood educators explore their representations of the

service in which they work and of the role of children (Biffi and Zuccoli, 2016). Since the objective was to work on prejudices, it was decided to use magazines as material. We used very contextualized images in order to address their specific target. The chosen magazines were about science, the house, cooking and animals, but also about motherhood. After the creation of the collages, each participant had the chance to talk about the meaning of their artefact. The collage was able to open metaphorical spaces that allowed the sharing of non-linear and ambiguous meanings that risk remaining implicit or not being fully talked about during a 'traditional' oral discussion.

INDIVIDUAL/GROUP TASK

What does it mean to be teachers/researchers in the field of art?

Conclusion

Art is a method of knowledge gathering in its own right, and as such invites us to reconsider the concepts of method and truth that are so dear to modern science. Perhaps it is for this key reason that it offers a valuable resource to those who wish to immerse themselves in the universe of childhood, a phase of life that is in some respects inaccessible to the gaze of the adult; though adults were once children, they have changed significantly since then. It is precisely adults' recognition of this distance and difference, and at the same time their strong need to access the perspective of the child, that stimulates teachers and researchers to seek strategies and methods for looking at the world with the eyes of a child. Given that it is impossible for adults to gain direct access to the child's point of view, art serves as a transitional space, or transitional dimension, to use the term proposed by Winnicott (1989), facilitating encounter and dialogue, provided, that is, that practitioners are willing to use alternative languages and to humbly set themselves to translating what they have learnt from the scientific universe of shared understanding.

This is surely a complex challenge, but unavoidable if researchers and practitioners truly wish to tap into children's polysemic thinking

and the complexity of educational experience. In taking up the challenge, approaches that draw on art represent a valuable resource that has yet to be fully explored.

With regard to the strengths and limitations of art as a research method, it is possible to summarise that:

- arts can allow the elicitation of inner meanings, but it requires technical competences of the researchers in order to identify the right technique based on the participants' skills;
- arts can support a shared process of knowledge building, but it requires attention in identifying the better form for the dissemination of the results in order to be understood; and
- arts can be used for enhancing children's engagement, but it requires a high level of attention considering the ethical perspective (avoiding an interpretative and manipulatory approach to the data analysis).

Art as research gives teachers and researchers the possibility to explore reality in a different manner, an open and creative path to explore educational challenges, and the chance to explore languages and proposals actively. This way of looking at the world will relapse onto the children they work with, opening the doors to many rich possibilities:

The arts have much to offer educational researchers-challenging us to think creatively about what constitutes research; to explore even more varied and creative ways to engage in empirical processes; and to share our questions and findings in more penetrating and widely accessible ways.

(Cahmann-Taylor, 2008: 4)

Recommended reading

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5

The use of drawing methods with young children in research

Helen Lydon

Introduction

In this chapter, the effectiveness of drawing as a research method with young children is explored. My own research eliciting children's responses using drawing in a variety of ways will be outlined through a discussion around process and outcome. These methods will be placed within a wider methodological context as I explore the research that inspired me to develop and test those drawing methods. The strengths and limitations of the methods will be discussed as I reflect on my own research experiences. The chapter will consider the importance of ethical considerations when researching in such a way with children, particularly as drawing and mark-making forms such a central part of emerging literacy skills.

The context of drawing

Many research methods in use today purport to listen to children's voice, and, with our youngest children, methodological boundaries have been pushed in relation to eliciting drawn responses from children in social research projects.

Drawing as a research methodology with young children has been popular for some time. Kara (2015) suggests that the 'draw and write technique' in educational research has been around since the 1970s, and is a flexible technique that can allow for both qualitative and