

Arts-based educational research in the early years

Georgina Barton

Griffith University, Australia

Abstract

This paper will explore arts-based educational research (ABER) as an effective and appropriate research method in the early years. It has been noted that the arts play an increasingly important role in the development of the child (Boone, 2008; Twigg, 2011a, 2011b; Twigg & Garvis, 2010; Wright, 2012). In fact McArdle and Wright (2014) call the arts children's first literacies. Research with young children can often be difficult given that they are often still developing their skills in communicating through language, whether oral or written. Other modes such as visual image through drawing, or audio through song, are innate skills that young children can use to communicate effectively. This paper will report on a number of projects that have used arts-based educational research methods with young children. It shows how much research, in the past, has often treated children as inferior participants, or in need of adult confirmation, whereas arts-based methods can be powerful platforms for research with children that gives children more of a voice in the research process.

Keywords: arts-based educational research (ABER); early years; development; multimodality

Introduction

Much research identifies the importance and benefits of the arts in young children's lives (Ewing, 2010; Twigg & Garvis, 2010; Twigg, 2011a, 2011b; Wright, 2012). According to Eisner (1972) "artistic learning and aesthetic experience are among the most sophisticated aspects of human action and feeling" (p. 1). It has also been noted that the arts play a vital role in the development of the child. Before children learn to read and write they draw, sing and dance (Kress, 1997). In fact McArdle and Wright (2014) believe that the arts are children's first literacies.

Kress (1997) highlights how certain paths to literacy involve ways in which children make meaning; real or imagined. The means by which children make sense of the world around them, according to Kress, is the precursor to reading. This is often conveyed through signs and symbols including drawings. Wright's (2010, 2012) work similarly explores how young children make meaning through symbol. The arts support the development of a child through a number of modes including visual, aural, language and movement or gestural. It is important to consider then, how these modes of learning and development can be used as effective research methods in an early years' context. Coad (2007) comments that more and more research in professional fields such as health and science are tending to include consultation with children or young people. In the area of education, much research concerns children in the early years.

It would therefore make sense that the arts are somehow involved in any research that is conducted with young children. Coad (2007) continues to explain that key researchers of children such as Bruner (1990), Vygotsky (1978) and Gardner (1991) have all implemented arts-based techniques when working with children. Another example is that of the Reggio Emilia approach as it "presents a particular model of learning which promotes the expressive arts as tools for developing children's thinking" (Coad, 2007, p. 488). This paper argues that research involving children and young people is more effective if they are required to express their ideas and feelings via arts-based methods. As the arts are integral to child development and can provide a vehicle for

children to express critical and deep thinking, research using arts-based methods can offer potentially profound outcomes that expression through language alone may not. The paper will also explore a number of examples where arts-based research methods are used in working with children.

Benefits and intrinsic nature of the arts in the early years

The arts have always been an integral part of early learning (McArdle & Wright, 2014). Ardent supporters of the arts in the early years often offer up that it is as an important, if not critical building block, in early childhood development (Edwards, 2002; Wright, 2012). There appears to be on the other hand a tendency to downplay the perceived value and role of arts in contributing to early childhood development beyond some minor influence on engaging young learners when they're not learning 'more formal' curriculum content such as experienced on standardised tests (Barton, Baguley & MacDonald, 2013). There is however a growing body of evidence amassed over the last decade pointing to specific benefits for early learners which stretch beyond the mere practice of art making for art's sake - a 'fun thing to do'. Arts learning and practices from dance, drama, music, and visual art in early childhood have been shown to influence achievement of identified learning outcomes as well as enabling behaviours and attitudes which support later learning (Eisner, 2002; Gardner, 1980).

These beneficial influences include:

- *Physical development* through hand-eye coordination and fine-motor skills acquisition and refinement
- *Social interaction* through experiences of sharing resources, assuming different roles in the art making process, and helping others, differentiating one's work from others, questioning, considering, evaluating and appreciating the work of others
- *Cognitive development* through arts specific language use, exploring and connecting concepts and objects to symbols, making choices over subject matter, different media, materials, and methods to produce art
- *Expressive qualities* including the ability to communicate concepts and ideas young learners may not have language to describe sufficiently but experience nonetheless
- *Imagination, creativity and experimentation* through trialling techniques, methods and materials and sequencing them in ways meaningful to the early learner, as well as linking one's own behaviours and actions with creative results and
- *Problem solving skills* which are often embedded in arts education such as producing a play, working out what colours or medium to use in visual arts, or deciding what sounds work together in a performance (Kindler, 1997; Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1970; Mace, 1997).

Without access to arts-based learning children are at risk of receiving an education that is not holistic in learning, that is cognisant of diverse learning styles and approaches; what some call a deficit education (Barton et. al. 2013; Ewing, 2010; Weiss, 1993). Ewing (2010) for example believes that the arts have the potential to transform "learning in formal educational contexts, and ensure that the curriculum engages and has relevance for all children" (p.1). In the early years learning in, through and of the arts is particularly important given the ways in which children understand and make meaning of the world around them. This is often achieved through the use of signs and symbols and via multiple modes of representation. Without quality and regular access to arts-based learning opportunities children will be less able to attain the skills listed above. Sinclair, Jeanneret and O'Toole (2010) highlight the integral aspect of early learning through play,

creativity and imagination. It would therefore seem appropriate to consider ways in which to research with children that value arts-based practices. The next section of the paper will explore the research method – arts-based educational research or ABER.

Arts based educational research and its application in early year's settings

What is ABER?

Arts based educational research or arts-based research¹ has been an accepted method of research in educational settings since its inception in the early 1990s by Elliot Eisner. This was developed further with Tom Barone. According to Barone and Eisner (2012) ABER accepts that meaning can be represented in multiple ways, not just discursive. Eisner (1991) explains that ABER allows the use of resources that are not just text such as visual images, music and dance, poetry and literature. These resources, he argues, allow children to grasp what cannot be revealed in text alone. According to Barone and Eisner (2012) ABER explores:

“the potentialities of an approach to representation that is rooted in aesthetic considerations and that, when it is at its best, culminates in the creation of something close to a work of art” (p. 1).

Barone (2008) further explains that ABER is not just a substitution for quantitative research or other forms of qualitative research but rather a method that extends researchers' perspectives. (Barone, 2008). ABER can be integrated with other qualitative methods however, including narrative inquiry, a/r/tography, ethnography, participatory research and so forth.

Leavy (2009) explains that ABER can be used to disrupt and extend the qualitative research paradigm as they can ‘unsettle’ a lot of assumptions about what constitute knowledge as well as research (p. 9). Leavy provides a comprehensive definition of this practice:

“AB[E]R practices are a set of methodological tools used by qualitative researchers across the disciplines during all phases of social research, including data collection, analysis, interpretation, and representation...this genre of methods also comprises new theoretical and epistemological groundings that are expanding the qualitative paradigm” (p. 2-3).

Arts-based research allows for rich ways to access experiential knowing (Liamputtong & Rumbold, 2008). Further, Liamputtong and Rumbold (2008) state that arts-based research is “particularly suited to working with participants who may not respond to the more verbal research methods such as survey forms, interviews and focus groups” (p. 3). This is important to consider in the early years as many children will still be developing their oral language but may be able to communicate more effectively through other modes of communication such as drawing, movement or other visual approaches.

I never made a painting as a work of art, it's all research (Pablo Picasso).

McNiff begins his chapter in Gary Knowles and Ardra Cole's *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research* (2008) with this quote by Pablo Picasso. It is relevant here as art is not always a concrete representation of the artist's ideas and feelings. The process that an artist goes through in order to produce an artwork is a vehicle by which to express a personal story or journey. This kind of storytelling is important to consider when working with children as story is very much a part of

¹ ABER is research conducted in educational settings. ABR is a derivative and conducted in non-educational settings such as in Science and Health. For the purpose of this paper ABER will be referred to.

their imagination and understanding of the world around them. McArdle and Wright (2014) point out:

“[W]hen young children create art, they can be expressing astonishing conceptual understanding and imagination, well beyond what they can communicate through language” (p. 22).

This makes ABER a most suitable research method when working with young children. Enabling the opportunity for children to participate in the research process as respected participants through ABER ensures authenticity when making statements about children’s work and perspectives.

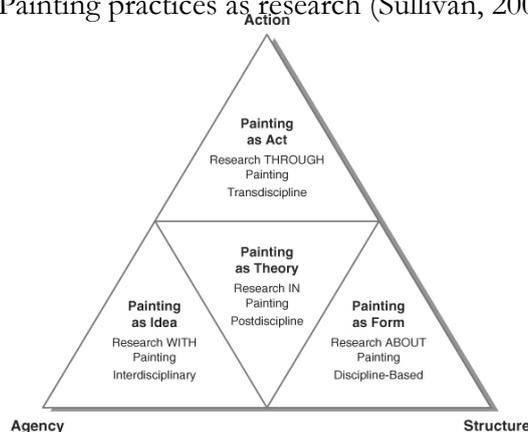
How is ABER undertaken?

ABER can be implemented and applied in different ways. As language can be a creative mode, for example in storytelling, poetry, creative writing etc. then expression of ideas using both artworks and language can be considered an effective use of ABER. Also, as stated previously, ABER can be easily integrated with other qualitative methods which will be explored later in this paper when specific work is shared. Essentially ABER can be conducted in multiple ways. Rolling (2013) provides a number of perspectives on the use of this method including as analytic, as synthetic, as critical-activist and as improvisatory research practice. In this way it is up to the researcher what approach and application of ABER best fits the research in mind.

ABER has been applied successfully for example, in a number of fields such as education, health, science, commerce and even engineering (Sinner, Leggo, Irwin, Gouzouasis & Grauer, 2006). Essentially in arts-based research the creative outcomes or ‘art’ can be the expression of the findings, the discussion, the implications, the conclusive statements. The mode or ensemble of modes chosen by the researcher is allowed to speak for themselves. In relation to conducting research ‘with children’ instead of ‘on children’, allowing opportunities for young children to express in different ways is important so that they have the agency to show the skills and knowledge that they have acquired already in the learning development continuum rather than use methods that limit their involvement.

Graeme Sullivan in Knowles and Cole (2008) provides one model that incorporates the artistic technique of painting in the research process. Figure 1 shows how painting can be a research practice. The model highlights the relationship between action, structure and agency and how using painting as an act, idea, form or theory can engage these concepts.

Figure 1: Painting practices as research (Sullivan, 2008, p. 241)



In this sense when painting is used as a research method with a distinct purpose – with, through, in, or about – it can bring about different outcomes and results. Sullivan explains that when we perceive painting more as a *verb* than a *noun*:

“...[w]e get a better sense of the way that painting as a practice is determined by the act of doing it. In this way, distinctions between terms such as painter, object, and viewer melt away as the circumstance or setting influences the meanings invoked in artistic efforts and encounters” (p. 241).

Applying this to work with young children means that artwork in the form of painting can be interpreted as a meaningful data set in whatever context is established. Rather than seeing the arts as just an ‘artwork’ it can be guided and directed to produce particular meanings.

Why should educators use ABER in practice?

As stated previously very young children are still developing both oral and written language (Hill, 2012). Given that further development of linguistic expression is a large focus of learning and teaching in the early years then, this mode of communication may not be the most effective method to gather thoughts, feelings, indeed data from such participants. According to Barrett, Everett and Smigiel (2012) there has been an increased interest of “children’s agency in and through their artistic practise” (p. 186). In addition, more awareness of children’s rights and their capacity and agency to contribute to research that explores their lives has occurred. Therefore it is important to consider the ways in which researchers engage children within the research being undertaken.

ABER offers a way in which children can fully participate in the research process and be recognised as co-researchers in the course of study (Barrett et al. 2012). Extending data evidence to modes other than just oral and/or written language enables children a voice in the representation of their own lives (Coad et. al. 2009; Christensen, 2004, p. 165). In this sense ABER extends beyond “the limiting constraints of discursive communication in order to express meanings” (p. 1) and is multimodal in nature. Bezemer and Kress (2008) note that a ‘mode’ is a “socially and culturally shaped resource for making meaning” (p. 171). When we organise these as ensembles they act as semiotic resources (Jewitt, 2006). If we then shift this meaning to the written word Bezemer and Kress (2008) believe that knowledge may be lost. Acknowledging and understanding that other semiotic tools such as image, sound, gesture and/or use of space (time and place) can offer powerful representations of meaning is important when considering research with children. This ensures that we accept the ways in which humans, including children, interact with each other and how they express ideas.

Lemke (2002) for example, indicates that expression through various modalities is organic and flowing and often occur in mixed ensembles.

“[W]ithin a semiotic modality, presentational, orientational and organisational meanings are not by any means totally independent of one another. The possible combinations do not all occur with equal probability and functionally each one helps us to interpret the others, especially in short ambiguous or unfamiliar texts or images. Human semiotic interpretation is both gestalt and iterative” (p. 305).

Lemke shows that organic communication for people tends to be multimodal in nature. Continuing to privilege language over other forms of expression is limiting, particularly if we consider early years' contexts, as expressing knowledge and feelings through arts practice, for young children is natural and innate. If they have yet to learn the alphabetic principle or are still developing their oral language then expecting research data to be expressed this way can be constraining. Therefore offering arts-based ways in which to express meaning enables children to have a real voice in the research process.

Examples of arts-based educational research with young children

The next section of this paper will explore a number of research studies that have used ABER with young children within different contexts.

Research with children on arts engagement

The first explores the work of Margaret Barrett (2002), as well as her research with Heather Smigiel (2003, 2012). Their research design:

“...sought to build on children’s knowledge and experience, and to value their engagement as co-researchers in exploring the research questions. Through the lens of narrative inquiry we sought to access children’s stories concerning their engagement with the arts” (Barrett & Smigiel, 2003, p. 4).

Both Barrett and Smigiel were concerned that much research on the importance of the arts in children’s lives failed to respect young children’s perspectives. In 2000, a national report entitled *Australians and the arts: What do the arts mean to Australians?* purported that perspectives of young children could be gained through adults such as their parents (Costantoura, 2000). This discounted the fact that young children could very much talk about their own experience, but additionally express these ideas through art itself. Barrett’s (2002) work with early years’ children on their music engagement for example, showed the capacity of children as being researched ‘with’ rather than researched ‘on’. In her article *Invented notations and mediated memory* (2002) she shares the work on two children’s approach to expressing ideas on music through the use of image or ‘invented notation’. Here the children were asked to explore ways in which to express music they heard through drawing and image. This research highlighted how children were capable of representing sound and music via their own symbolic methods.

Some 10 years later Barrett, Everett and Smigiel (2012) share findings from children aged 5-8 years. This research was participatory research where the children were asked to share their perceptions of the arts. Barrett, et. al. (2012) state that the children were at the centre of the investigation and as such, were treated as co-researchers. They were, according to the researchers “knowledgable informants in respect to the phenomenon under investigation- their understandings and experience of the arts” (p. 187). Consequently, any intervening or mediating between adults was not necessary.

This study focussed on what the arts ‘do’ for children rather than their own meaning-making in arts practice. It referred to children’s perspective through both conversation (language) and their drawing and photography (visual imagery). The visual image was present to provoke this discussion. The participants (140 children from up to 14 early childhood settings) were guided to: 1. Take as many photos as they like that represent the arts and select eight of them and 2. Name these photos (p. 181). They were also asked to do a ‘Draw and Tell’ task and talk in small focus groups about the ways in which they participated in the arts; both in and out of school.

According to the researchers, the conversations documented the important role that the arts played in the children's everyday lives, particularly with their families. Much of it also focused on the benefits of these experiences. Generally, the findings showed that children engage in arts practice for social bonding with family and friends; for stimulation of "imagination and creative thought and expression" (p. 199).

The 'Draw and Tell' task, according to Barrett and Smiegel (2012), was an important strategy for the children to express their ideas that their arts engagement is cognitively, emotionally, socially, physically and aesthetically fulfilling. This, the authors contend should inform the development and continuation of arts practice and policy within Australian schools and arts organisations.

In considering implications for early childhood research the researchers recommended that in order to engage children in research productively then the processes and practices of the arts should be employed. For young children, opportunities to talk about and express their experiences via multimodal means is important, according to Barrett et. al. (2012) as it can: "build their current understandings; increase their evident appreciation for and capacity to analyse their experiences; make connections between their experience of the arts in and beyond school; foster their well-being; and stimulate their capacity for creative thought and activity" (p. 200).

This information is useful for early childhood researchers because if the children in this study were not asked about their perspectives and involvement in the arts the outcomes would be limited in understanding a deep meaning such participation. Parents for example, may have a pre-conceived idea about what benefits as well as other implications for children's participation in the arts. Similarly, if Barrett and Smiegel had only got the young participants to talk about these experiences there would be a risk of not receiving information that the children may not be able to articulate through words and also the children may have only provided the information they thought the researchers would require (see also Barton & Bahr, 2013).

Research with children in health settings

There is much research that uses arts-based participatory research in the field of health (Coad, 2007; Cole & McIntyre, 2003; Driessnack & Gallo, 2011; Lambert, Coad, Hicks and Glacken, 2014; McIntyre & Cole, 2008). A common link here is therapeutic practice (Payne, 1993; Wiener, 1999). In fact arts therapy is often used with young children in supporting them through poor health or difficult personal times in their lives. Recent research with children in health settings has utilised ABR to assist the children in being important participants in the research process. Lambert et.al. (2014) show how arts-based expression and methods enable potentially powerful outcomes for research questions and findings. This particular research explored children's perspectives of what would be the best physical layout for hospital-built environments. The study involved 55 children who were hospitalised. All children involved in this study were between 5 and 8 years of age. There were 24 boys and 31 girls from a range of cultural backgrounds as well as various health care conditions including chronic and acute illnesses.

The children were asked to draw and speak about what their preferred hospital room would look like including any particular physical features but also social aspects of the space. The study aimed to use this data in informing a proposed design of a new children's hospital in Ireland. Some of the children were unable to draw, due to their illness, but were able to talk about their desired place of stay. Other children participated in groups in creating their 'perfect' hospital room using art and craft materials while being supported by an artist through an Arts and Health company or

individually completed drawings with a researcher from hospital their bed. The following shows the instructions given to each child:

“Draw, colour, design a perfect (ideal) hospital room. Include everything you need to make your stay in hospital as comfortable as possible (as home like). You draw what you think a room should look like, design a bed, create a floor plan, or draw a hospital from inside . . .

When finished drawing children were asked:

Tell me about your drawing? What were you thinking about when you drew your perfect (ideal) hospital room? What is really important about this room? Is there anything the room should have that can't be seen in the drawing? What kind of things or places would you like nearby your room (and not like nearby your room)?” (Lambert et. al., 2014, p. 62)

Findings from the study show that children very much know the types of environments they would prefer to be staying in while they are in hospital. In fact, there were many aspects found that are often overlooked in the design of children's hospital rooms. In regard to the physical environment the children, according to the researchers, showed that they valued a “colourful, creative, comfortable interior environment which had easy access to the external environment” (p. 63). The children tended to creatively use the space, include imaginative décor and brought aspects of the outside natural environment into the inside one.

Further, children “wanted to experience a seamless and smooth-flowing environment that would enable them to easily find their way and orientate themselves to the hospital setting” (Lambert, et. al., 2014, p. 64). Interestingly, the children's interaction with the environment including first impressions, orientation within the entire hospital, and being able to move and play were all important aspects for the children. A most valued feature for the children was to be able to be with the parents and family in a dignified and private manner. Issues and concerns such as adequate storage, noise and lighting were also highlighted.

The research team found that children had strong and extremely relevant ideas about what types of hospital rooms suit their needs during illness. Being able to express these ideas not only through talking, for some of the children, provided a much needed platform for them to present their ideas. The images shared in the article about this study clearly showed children's in-depth understanding about the environment they would prefer but also the ones in which they were currently in. Without the inclusion of arts-based approaches in this study there would have been limited understanding of what these children were able to articulate in regard to preferred spaces while they were unwell and often away from family and home.

Background to the study

Research with children in school settings

Much research in the early years occurs in school settings, often aiming to improve learning and teaching. Research focusing on literacy development has found that including ways in which children understand concepts related to literacy learning through multiple means of communication (such as arts-based methods) allows them to show this understanding in ways that best suit them (Barton, 2014; Barton & Baguley, 2014). An example was a research project conducted in a small multi-age school with eighteen children from Prep to Year 7 (aged 5 to 12 years).

In 2012, the school based their annual end-of-year performance on Graeme Base's (1992) *The Sign of the Seahorse*², a story with a moral message of environmental consciousness and sustainability for the sea and its many creatures. While preparing for this performance the children studied their own character in detail. This included an in-depth understanding of what their character looked like, sounded like, moved like and how it related to the other characters in the story. The children were involved in creating their own costumes, props and sets. The children worked closely with their teachers and teaching assistants as well as one other throughout the entire production.

Research design and methods

This research study aimed to view phenomena in action and is therefore qualitative. As part of the research project a number of data sets were included: documentation of the production through the use of video (from early rehearsals to the final performance), drawings, reflective practice and interview data with the view of investigating the impact of the process on the children's understanding of the narrative as well as the ways in which they worked collaboratively together in developing their literacy learning. Barton and Baguley (2014) analysed this data using Tuckman's (1965) theory of collaboration and social semiotics (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

For the purpose of this paper a focus on the arts-based and multimodal practices through the project will occur. Semiotic representations such as aural, gestural, linguistic, spatial and visual modes can be used to explain key content and concepts, in addition to describing children's knowledge and understanding of the world around them (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; Lemke, 2000). The participants in this study were aged from 5 through to 12 years of age. The following discussion focuses on the children between 5 and 7 years.

Results and discussion

There were a number of stages involved in the preparation of the final performance. Barton and Baguley (2014) describe these stages as: 1. *Becoming* familiar with the script; 2. *Belonging* to a storytelling group; and 3. *Being* a collaborative and reflective performer. This is based on the *Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (DEEWR, 2009).

Becoming

In the first phase of the study the children were *becoming* familiar with the story by reading the drama script. This involved language-verbal and gestural modes of communication as the teacher encouraged the children to expressively speak their lines using particular facial features. Given that the children ranged from Prep to Year 7 the older children acted as mentors in supporting the younger children in preparing for their role in the play.

After becoming familiar with the script the children worked further on their characterisation by designing costumes, improving their movement and gesture, and drawing their characters. In one activity the children were asked:

1. What does your character look like?
2. Where does your character live?
3. What does your character do?

This activity was particularly important for the younger children as they were still developing their skills in writing. Being given the opportunity to not only talk about their characters but also draw

² The author would like to thank both Graeme Base and Hal Leonard for their support of the school's end of year project.

them assisted the younger children in designing their own costumes. It also assisted the children in developing further understanding of the key personality and physical traits of their characters.



Figures 2 and 3: Soldier Crab #27 and #28 characters (Image release courtesy of the participants)



Figures 4 and 5: Angelfish characters (Image release courtesy of the participants)

Figures 2, 3, 4 and 5 show an understanding of the attributes of each character, which are the roles of the soldier crabs with their large pincers, and the colourful images of the angelfish. These drawings, a visual representation of the characters, then provided the children a stimulus to which they could discuss their ideas based on the questions above.

Belonging

In the rehearsal phase the children were learning how to *belong* in an effective performance group. It was through this phase of learning that arts-based practices of drama and dance (gestural-embodiment) became the focus. The children had to learn how to work together as a group in presenting the story effectively to an audience.

The data showed an increase in the children's spatial awareness in relation to the staging. This included both their movement on the stage and also the relationship between themselves and

others. At the beginning of this phase the children rehearsed mainly in an outdoor area in the school where the teacher had placed tape on the ground to indicate areas of the ‘stage’ the children should be aware of (refer to Figure 6).



Figure 6: The early years’ children are shown here working with the older children in understanding the stage space (Image release courtesy of participants)

After rehearsing for a number of weeks the children then progressed to the dress rehearsal – a few days before the actual performance. This was ‘performed’ in the classroom in costume and with the set. Figure 7 shows the children rehearsing in their final dress rehearsal. During this phase all of the modes were employed including: aural (music and song), gestural-embodied (movement on stage as well as facial expression); language-verbal (reciting lines and singing); spatial (use of the stage including vertical and horizontal staging); and visual (costumes and set).



Figure 7: The same taped area is provided for the children – along with the set and props (Image release courtesy of participants)

Being

The final phase in the performance was where the children were *being* reflective performers. Not only did they employ all of the modes of representation, as in their dress rehearsal, but they also needed to be reflective during the actual performance. If, for example, anything went wrong they needed to think quickly on their feet to move the performance forward.



Figures 8 and 9: Still shots from the final performance (Image release courtesy of the participants)

Figures 8 and 9 show the entire cast with the children in the costumes they helped design. The younger children were mentored through the performance by the older children.

After the performance the children were asked to talk about their experience in belonging in the performance. They were also asked to talk about how being part of the performance helped with their literacy learning.

Comments from the children about their character and involvement in the end of year production include:

My character was Swali – he was mean and helped the baddies with their evil schemes...The dances made it really energetic and more fun. You got to do more things like dancing and acting not just writing. It helped me to think about stories that could have happened before (Year 2 student).

I was Finneus – he is like part of a gang and is a red fish. He does his own things he doesn't do what his parents say. The catfish gang wanted to be part of the bad team but the bad team didn't let us so we made a catfish game – I was the leader. I like the dancing and the lights flashing when we danced. I learn how to have a loud voice and acting such as moving around the stage (Year 3 student).

Taffy was my character and I was tough. He is naughty and we get in trouble a lot. I like all the dancing, it was fun and I liked the audience there. When there is no audience you don't feel great because there is nobody there except the teachers. When it is the show you feel so excited because there are all these people watching you. You feel happy and know it is going to be a good night. It helped my drama and my voice to get bigger and it is really fun (Year 1 student).

The play went really good and I think everybody did a really good job. I liked watching it later on the DVD. It was exciting (Prep student).

For these children a greater understanding of the story was gained by performing the key plot and theme via a multimodal arts production. The development of critical comprehension and recall skills for children in the early years of learning is crucial to reading success (Hill, 2012). Therefore the use of arts-based methods in expressing this comprehension enabled children to represent their understanding as well as describe what they liked and benefited from such a project.

A way forward for researching with young children using the arts

Findings from this study showed that when children worked collaboratively in producing an end-of-year performance they developed a deeper understanding of the narrative as they participated in multi-modal representations of the story (Barton & Baguley, 2014). The children were asked to explore the story using a number of arts-based strategies that were utilised to assist them in understanding the plot, characters, setting and theme of the narrative; that are often missed from just reading the story. Without the opportunities to express knowledge in different ways this understanding would not have been possible.

This paper has purported the powerful potential of ABER as an appropriate and much needed research approach when working with young children. As researchers we have an obligation to treat participants in a respectful and dignified manner; this includes working with children. Considering ABER as an appropriate research method when working with children is important as it allows them to present their ideas via multiple-modes of expressions and communication. As Barone & Eisner (2013, p.8-9) note:

“[A]rts based research is the utilisation of aesthetic judgment and the application of aesthetic criteria in making judgements about what the character of the intended outcome is to be. In arts based research, the aim is to create an expressive form that will enable an individual to secure an empathic participant in the lives of others and in the situations studied”.

This is critically important in the lives of young children and if there was not the opportunity for young children to express themselves in any form they feel comfortable, then we would be at risk of not knowing the full meaning of their experience.

Barone and Eisner (2012) conclude their book with ten fundamental ideas that can be taken from ABER. Of relevance for any researcher who is contemplating using ABER when working with young children is the fact that, as humans, we have multiple ways in which we describe and understand the world. Consequently, the ways in which we, as individuals, make sense of our own context may not offer final concrete meanings but rather raise significant questions and encourage further conversation (p. 166).

ABER therefore, in its qualitative form, can ultimately pass the research outcomes onto children as agentic participants or informers. Researchers using ABER therefore, must be prepared of the possibility of not reaching a conclusive end or answer to their problem or hypothesis. This allows for expressive input that supports both equality and equity between the researcher and researched, ultimately contributing to human understanding and respect of all others, especially children.

References

- Barrett, M. (2002). Invented notations and mediated memory: A case-study of two children's use of invented notations. *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, 153/4, 55-62.
- Barrett, M., & Smigiel, H. (2003). Awakening the “Sleeping Giant”? The arts in the lives of Australian families. *International Journal of Education and the Arts*, 4(4), Retrieved from: <http://www.ijea.org/v4n4/>
- Barrett, M., & Smigiel, H. (2007). Children’s perspectives of participation in music youth arts settings: Meaning, value and participation. *Research Studies in Music Education*, 28, 39-50.

Barrett, M., Everett, M., & Smigiel, H. (2012). Meaning, value and engagement in the arts: Findings from a participatory investigation of young Australian children's perceptions of the arts. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 44, 185-201.

Barton, G.M., Baguley, M., & MacDonald, A. (2013). Seeing the bigger picture: Investigating the state of the arts in teacher education programs in Australia. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 38(7), <http://ro.ecu.edu.au/ajte/vol38/iss7/6>

Barton, G.M., & Bahr, N. (2013). (2013). Perspectives on schooling from early adolescent video diaries. *The International Journal of Technologies in Learning*, 19(4), 63-75.

Barton, G.M. (2014). Literacy and the arts: Interpretation and expression of symbolic form. In G.M. Barton (Ed.). *Literacy in the Arts: Retheorising Learning and Teaching*, (pp. 3-20). Switzerland: Springer International Publishing.

Barton, G.M., & Baguley, M. (2014). Learning through story: A collaborative, multimodal arts approach. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, 13(2), 93-112.

Barone, T., & Eisner, E. (2012). *Arts-based research*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications Inc.

Barone, T. (2008). How arts-based research can change minds. In M. Cahnmann-Taylor & R. Siegesmund (Eds.), *Arts-Based Research in Education: Foundations for Practice*, (pp. 28-49). New York, NY: Routledge.

Base, G. (1992). *The sign of the seahorse*. Sydney: Penguin Books.

Bezemer, J., & Kress, G. (2008). Writing in multimodal texts: A social semiotic account of designs for learning. *Written Communication*, 25(2), 166-195.

Boone (Twigg), D.J. (2008). Young children's experience of visual displays of their artwork. *Australian Art Education*, 31(2), 22-45. Carlton, VIC: Art Education Australia. <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/27557/>

Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of meaning*. Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press.

Christensen, P. (2004). Children's participation in ethnographic research: Issues of power and representation. *Children and Society*, 18, 165-176.

Coad, J. (2007). Using art-based techniques in engaging children and young people in health care consultations and/or research. *Journal of Research in Nursing*, 12(5), 487-497.

Coad, J., Plumridge, G., & Metcalfe, A. (2009). Involving children and young people in the development of art-based research tools. *Nurse Researcher*, 16(4), 56-64.

Cole, A., & McIntyre, M. (2003). Arts-informed Research for Public Education: The Alzheimer's Project. *Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education*, Online proceedings.

Costantoura, P. (2000). *Australians and the arts: What do the arts mean to Australians? (Overview)*. Sydney: Australia Council.

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace relations (DEEWR) (2009). *Belonging, being and becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*. Australia: Commonwealth of Australia.

Driessnack, M., & Gallo, A.M. (2011). Stop, look, and listen revisiting the involvement of children and adolescents in genomic research. *Annual Review of Nursing Research*, 29, 133–149.

Edwards, L.C. (2002). *The creative arts: A process approach for teachers and children*, 3rd Ed. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.

Eisner, E. (1972). *Educating artistic vision*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co. Inc.

Eisner, E. (1991). *The enlightened eye: Qualitative inquiry and the enhancement of educational practice*. Toronto: Macmillan Publishers.

Eisner, E. (2002). *The arts and the creation of mind*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press

Ewing, R. (2010). *The arts and Australian education: Realising potential*. Camberwell, Australia: Australian Council for Educational Research.

Gardner, H. (1980). *Artful scribbles: The significance of children's drawings*. New York: Basic Books.

Gardner, H. (1991). *The unschooled mind: How children think and how schools should teach*. New York: Basic Books.

Hill, S. (2012). *Developing early literacy: Teaching and assessment*, 2nd Ed. Victoria, Australia: Eleanor Curtain Publishers.

Jewitt, C. (2006). *Technology, literacy and learning: A multimodal approach*. London: Routledge.

Kindler, A. M. (1997). *Child development in art*. Reston, VA: National Art Education Association.

Knowles, G., & Cole, A. (2008). *Handbook of the arts in qualitative research: Perspectives, methodologies, examples and issues*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Kress, G. (1997). *Before writing: Rethinking the paths to literacy*. London: Routledge Publishers.

Lambert, V., Coad, J., Hicks, P., & Glacken, M. (2014). Young children's perspectives of ideal physical design features for hospital-built environments. *Journal of Child Health Care*, 18(1), 57–71.

Leavy, P. (2009). *Method meets art: Arts-based research practice*. New York: The Guilford Press.

Lemke, J. (2002). Travels in hypermodality. *Visual Communication*, 1(3), 299–325.

Liamputtong, P., & Rumbold, J. (2008). *Knowing differently: Arts-based and collaborative research methods*. New York, USA: Nova Science Publishers, Inc.

Lowenfeld, V., & Brittain, W. L. (1970). *Creative and mental growth* (5th ed.). New York: Macmillan.

McArdle, F., & Wright, S. (2014). First literacies: Art, creativity, play, constructive meaning-making. In G.M. Barton (Ed.). *Literacy in the Arts: Rethorising Learning and Teaching*, (pp. 21-38). Switzerland: Springer International Publishing.

McIntyre, M., & Cole, A. (2008). Love stories about caregiving and Alzheimer's disease: A performative methodology, *Journal of Health Psychology*, 13(2), 213-225.

McNiff, S. (1998). *Art-based research*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

McNiff, S. (2008). Arts-based research. In G. Knowles, & A. Cole (Eds.). *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research*, (pp. 29-42), Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

Mace, M. (1997). Toward an understanding of creativity through a qualitative analysis of contemporary art making. *Creativity Research Journal*, 10(2-3), 265-278.

Payne, H. (Ed.). (1993). *Handbook of inquiry in the arts therapies: One river, many currents*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Rolling, J. H. (2013). *Arts-based research*. New York: Peter Lang Primer.

Sinclair, C., Jeanneret, N., & O'Toole, J. (Eds.). (2010). *Education in the arts: teaching and learning in the contemporary curriculum, 2nd ed.* Australia: Oxford University Press.

Sinner, A., Leggo, C., Irwin, R.L., Gouzouasis, P., & Grauer, K. (2006). Arts-based educational research dissertations: Reviewing the practices of new scholars. *Canadian Journal of Education* 29(4), 1223-1270.

Smithbell, P. (2010). Arts-based research in education: A review. *The Qualitative Report*, 15(6), 1597-1601.

Sullivan, G. (2008). Painting as research: Create and critique. In G. Knowles, & A. Cole (Eds.). *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research*, (pp. 240-252), Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

Twigg, D. (2011a). Handle with care: Researching the lived experiences of young children in early childhood settings. *International Journal of Arts and Sciences*, 4(11), Cumberland, RI: InternationalJournal.org.

Twigg, D. (2011b). Look out below (and above)!: Challenging traditional methods of displaying young children's artwork. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 12(3), Oxford, UK: Symposium Journals Ltd.

http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/search/detailmini.jsp?_nfpb=true&_ERICExtSear

Twigg, D., & Garvis, S. (2010). Exploring art in early childhood education. *The International Journal of the Arts in Society*, 5(2), 193-204.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1978) *Mind and society: The development of higher mental processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Weiss, G. (1993). From skills to expression: The arts in the early years of schools 1880-1970. *Australian Art Education*, 16(2), 32-38.

Wiener, D.J. (Ed.). (1999). *Beyond talk therapy: Using movement and expressive techniques in clinical practice*. Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association.

Wright, S. (Ed.). (1991). *The arts in early childhood*. New York: Prentice Hall.

Wright, S. (2010). *Understanding creativity in early childhood: Meaning-making and children's drawings*. London: Sage Publications.

Wright, S. (2012). *Children, meaning-making and the arts* (2nd ed.). Frenchs Forest, Australia: Pearson education

Author Details

Dr Georgina Barton is a lecturer in the School of Education and Professional Studies at Griffith University, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia. For over twenty years Dr Barton has been a classroom teacher, from Prep to Year 12, and literacy educator in schools. Her research and publications are in the areas of Arts literacies, multiliteracies and modalities, arts and music education, and teacher education.

Contact details: g.barton@griffith.edu.au