CHAPTER 6: ARTS BASED APPROACHES TO RESEARCH WITH
CHILDREN: LIVING WITH MESS

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After the emergence of a distinct sociology of childhood, methodological approaches to research with children, have been particularly concerned to work ethically and meaningfully with them. In this volume, Elizabeth Wood (Chapter 9) takes us beyond this consideration of ethics, challenging some of the rhetoric about the use of visual media to empower children within a research process. It is important to avoid positioning new technologies, in particular, as a panacea, which enables researchers to get inside children's minds. However, concerns about the limitations of an overuse of the written and spoken word in research, alongside rapid technological innovation have precipitated an increased use of visual methods. It is therefore appropriate to reflect on the impact of this change. In this chapter I focus on arts based methods in research with children and young people, influenced by the notion, perhaps best described by Loris Malaguzzi, (1987) that children have 100 languages with which they express their emerging thoughts and ideas and that each form makes different expressions, ideas and articulations possible.

I propose that it is important to acknowledge the potential of visual and arts based methods to enable us to distance ourselves from the rhetoric of much quantitative work (Firestone, 1987) in which the dominant research cycle involves identifying simplistic causal relationships or numerically contestable patterns and trends. In doing so, I argue that arts based methods which invite participants to take part in a creative process, enable us to live with and even revel in the mess, uncertainty and ambiguity of research, and thereby of the world. I therefore present a rationale for the use of creative film production in research with children, and highlight some of the challenges and possibilities of working in this medium. I then reflect on the way in which issues such as the nature of creativity, the role of remixing and the need to make a mess, play out in the creative arts based process, described in chapter 7, in relation to designing video games for hospitalized children.

In both qualitative and participative educational research there is an increased recognition that language is not the only form of expression for the purposes of collecting and disseminating data. Hart (1992) observes that in research, children are commonly subjects of formal, language-orientated methods:

> *Unfortunately most social science research with children is still*
> *of the distant adult controlled type: questionnaires and*
> *structured interviews which barely scrape the surface of what*

children are able to tell.

<div align="center">(Hart, 1992 p.14)</div>

Such research is met, by some children, with a resounding 'culture of silence' (Reason, 1994 p.328). Gauntlett (2005) argues that relying solely on formal methods of data collection, based on analysis of spoken and written language, restricts participation. Furthermore, research which enables children with particular verbal and written language skills to dominate can obscure the experiences of others. In the emerging literature about participatory approaches to research with children, there are many calls for diverse, flexible and culturally appropriate methods which overcome the 'I don't know syndrome,' which acts as a barrier to research (Malone, 1999 p. 18). Blackburn et al, (1998) argue that 'visually, more diversity and complexity are expressed than can be put into words' (p. 8). Eisner (1993) highlights the different modes of representation with different affordances available to educational researchers who adopt arts based approaches::

> *Artistic approaches to research are less concerned with the discovery of truth than with the creation of meaning. What art seeks is not the discovery of the laws of nature about which true statements or explanations can be given, but rather the creation of images that people will find meaningful and from which their fallible and tentative views of the world can be altered, reflected or made more secure.*

<div align="center">(Eisner, 1993 p.9)</div>

The productive results of creative collaborations can be seen throughout this volume, highlighting the need for researchers to acknowledge and indeed live comfortably with the messiness of a wide range of different points of view. The contemporary research context, particularly in relation to education, overly values the answering of questions in order to raise standards (Wood, this volume). The full potential of arts based approaches in helping to identify important new questions is yet to be recognised in a broader national context where discussions of hard evidence and sharp data dominate even arts research funding schemes. Documentary filmmaker Michael Heneke, (2005) proposes that it is the role of art to pose the questions, rather than provide the answers. It is useful to see research, like art, focusing on what the questions might be and then posing them in ways which allow collaboration and indeed co-construction of meaning. This requires us to resist the temptation to tidy up

too quickly or focus in too narrowly in our hurry to provide answers to improve aspects of children's educational achievement.

The art form or medium we choose in a research context with children, is highly significant to the outcomes. Christensen and James (2000) suggest the adoption of practices which resonate with children's own concerns and routines. Pink (2001) also recognizes the importance of cultural context, suggesting that no text, visual or otherwise, is produced in isolation from forms and conventions of existing texts. Thus, the medium we choose, whether that is film, still image or drawing, can have a particular role in shaping the entire research process. Furthermore, children participating in research often have extensive experience of particular media or art forms and these can usefully inform the research process. By contrast it may be that a proposed art form or creative process is unfamiliar to children and whilst this does not necessarily mean that we should not use it, the lack of familiarity becomes part of the creative process and should be taken into account. What is more, children are far from a homogenous group; the messiness of reality requires researchers to take into account wide ranging difference in terms of children's cultural and social experiences.

Niesyto, Buckingham and Fisherkeller (2003) usefully point to the idea that 'the method of research should follow the object of research' (Niesyto, Buckingham and Fisherkeller, 2003 p.1). They also emphasise that verbal based methods such as narrative interviews, group discussions or written field notes 'only provide limited access to the emotional and symbolic aspects of children's experience, and to media-related models of expression' (ibid, p.1). Gauntlett (2005) similarly highlights the benefits of working in the medium, which is the subject of the research. Using the medium which is also the focus of the study in order to research and share insights provides opportunities for a fully reflexive process. The proliferation of digital cameras in phones, tablets and desktop devices has encouraged more researchers to use digital video in their research with children. However, a distinction should be made between this use of digital video (or other pieces of hardware to record data) and that which involves children in a creative process of making film.

Film has been increasingly used as a tool for research, to record interviews and enable researchers to see body language or contextual data. Software has been devised to ensure that film can be coded and analysed as effectively as transcripts of speech. As Flewitt (2006) points out in her study of children's interactions in the early years classroom:

> *Rather than focusing on a single mode, such as spoken or written language, using video to collect data reveals the multimodal dynamism of classroom interaction, giving new insights into how children and adults coordinate different modes as they negotiate and jointly construct meanings in different social settings.*
>
> (Flewitt, 2006, p.4)

Kress et al (2005) also use a multimodal approach to their research into urban English classrooms, collecting data relating to body language, background noise, pauses, and the classroom environment using video recordings. As rich as this use of film is, it does not draw on the potential of 'film as an inherently narrative medium' to communicate (Ruby, 1980 p. 143). Filmmaking can be used not just to record interviews or to observe but as a form of narrative with its own communicative power and affective qualities.

Soep (2003) proposes that community-based media projects offer new models for research methodology. She describes how, in her own work with children on a radio project, the process of working as interns in a highly collaborative process, facilitated by adults, enabled them to initiate, create and frame stories for radio broadcast and that this was in itself a research process which could usefully contribute to the production of scholarship:

> *In our field, as in others focussed on youth culture, scholars are increasingly seeking more reciprocal methods that provide alternatives to objectification on the one hand and romanticisation on the other.*
>
> (Soep, 2003 p.2)

The important shift that Soep (2003) recognises is in the use of media production as a methodology. Soep argues that children are storytellers themselves, who can form questions, find appropriate methods of research and documentation and then share these stories in order that their work has significance to its audience and that this is a rich context for a researcher to enter. Media production, in its ability to facilitate group collaboration, particularly enables pedagogies of shared investigation and research.

In the following example, I worked with a year 5 class (9 and 10 year olds) in a primary school in the north of England for a period of 18 months and this involved them in a range of creative storytelling and filmmaking activities - records of the process, as well as the texts themselves formed the basis of

my data. The wider project research questions were focused on the children's engagements with film and filmmaking, the role of film in their storytelling through other media and their understandings of narrative as expressed through their filmmaking.

This activity was designed to give the children a sustained opportunity to undertake each stage of live action film production:

- Pre-production: the devising, planning, script-writing and storyboarding of their film story idea.
- Production: the performance and filming of their story idea.
- Post production: the editing of their film footage.

The children also organised two screenings of their work and produced some promotional materials and this aspect of the process was also considered in this analysis. They worked in same gender and friendship groups, producing two distinct films.

At the outset, the children were all given a common set of creative constraints, including setting the film in a school. Given the short time scales and limited resources the children had to be well organised, collaborative, focused and determined. Far from the romantic view of creativity being about originality or talent the process was both disciplined and structured. Soep echoes Hart (1992) in her argument that children need to work collaboratively with adults to learn the skills required to undertake media production. By contrast some visual researchers (Cavin, 1994; Young and Barrett, 2001) have given children cameras as part of an ethnographic approach and have not worried about the aesthetic qualities of the texts created. They perceive the resulting photographs as an opportunity to explore how children intuitively frame the world. However, film production is a complex, multimodal, creative process and it cannot be assumed children possess these skills simply by watching film. In my previous experience of working on filmmaking projects with children in education contexts, I found that they had high expectations of their film productions and were often disappointed if their work seemed amateur. I also found that some filmmakers became concerned with their own professional reputation and would often take control over an aspect of the process, especially editing, in order to tidy up the finished product. It was clear that even in a research context the participants were extremely keen to make the best work they could and to share it with family and friends. Since I wanted to be able to observe them in a creative process, in which they acted on their own story ideas and decision making, it was key to ensure they had some basic filmmaking skills before starting the process. I therefore provided

a number of training sessions before asking the children to undertake the production of their own short film.

In the final film production process I attempted to stand back from shaping, in any way, the stories the children told and how they told them. Where I did advise them on uses of the camera, microphone and editing, I did so in response to specific requests for help and also not from any position of great authority. This dialogue became highly useful in the process of analysis. For example, I was able to reflect on decisions the children made as a result of any collaboration with me, because these decisions were made collectively and explicitly. Decisions about the type of shot and angle to use were often not made at the planning stage and sometimes key ideas could not be achieved. However, by following the full process it was possible to record the transition from many, various ideas to a relatively coherent short film. Interestingly, some of these decisions were made hurriedly and in a quite arbitrary manner, but many others were carefully considered and it was these that I analysed further. I was able to identify the decisions which were important to the children through my role as a facilitator in the process, asking them why they had made particular decisions.

To some degree the films made explicit some of the more important decisions made. For example, the setting of one scene near a fence, which gave an urban feel, was a carefully considered choice by one group based on their experience of both films and computer games. The choice of the school hall as another setting was due to a lack of alternative options. It is possible to over attribute meaning within children's texts and therefore focusing on the messy and complex process of film production was critical. Without the pressure to exhibit the films as polished products, some of the messiness remains visible and indeed audible throughout the film but also in the many outtakes the children decided to include.

In the analysis and dissemination of children's film production there is a tendency, which is not unique to research, to be entirely celebratory (Burn, 2007). As Wood (this volume) explains, claims are made about empowerment and giving children a voice. Grace and Tobin (2002) note the importance of not idealising children's productions and finding ways to evaluate them meaningfully. Within research a useful approach to analyzing children's films is to think of them as remixes of an array of ideas and influences which can be identified and reflected upon. Furthermore, close observation and involvement in the creative process enables the researcher to explore children's meaning-making and in the case of film, focus on those modes that

inform significant choices. Therefore, I included in my analysis, considerations of the planned, improvised and performed elements of the children's films, including uses of sound, music, shots, light, costume, gesture and performance. I related these elements to the elements of narrative, character, setting and plot in order to make comparisons with the choices the children made in print, drawn and oral form.

This structure enabled me to compare the children's stories created in different forms (Parry, 2013) and in particular to trace the sources from which their texts were redesigned (to use Kress', 2003 term). However, there were times when the choices the children made were influenced by ideas they could not recall. There were ideas which were not associated with a particular text and had indeed become generalised or abstract knowledge, that is to say ideas you might find in any number of fairy stories rather than ideas from one particular fairy story. Furthermore, some decisions were made because they just felt right and this was particularly the case with regard to choices of sound track. This is a potentially significant limitation of arts based research, that is to say there is a degree of intuition and spontaneity in the creative process which might result in something meaningful, but that meaning may not have been explicitly intended by the creator.

To offer an example, in another drawn animation activity, one boy created a hybrid character who was both cowboy and vampire. He had drawn a design or what looked like an emblem or cross on the character which I became interested in and asked about. He laughed and told me that his pen had been jogged but he quite liked the effect so repeated the design all over the drawing. Clearly, this is another form of 'mess' which positions the researcher alongside the artist, deliberating about attribution of meaning to a text or piece of art. However, the process of filmmaking, potentially encourages children to deconstruct textual conventions in order to make their intuitive knowledge about the world, in this case film and popular culture, explicit. The possibility of discerning between intentionality and random acts within a research process is also a rich quality of arts based research, and not something that it is easy to do in more distant methods in which the researcher attempts to position themselves outside the research.

In the following chapter Caroline Classie and Xinglin Sun present an account of an arts based approach to research which aimed to reflect on the design of video games for hospitalised children. The playful and creative approach described, provided a meeting place for ideas from researchers, games designers, medical staff, parents and children. Classie and Sun, both visual artists, acknowledge the importance of the range of modes available for expression and the way in which each mode has a specific set of meaning making affordances. Intriguingly, they suggest that the materials used, in any creative research process, have their own agency. This observation has

prompted me to think again about the way in which a resource, medium or material provides a structure for the research process. Even if we are unfamiliar with manipulating clay or writing computer code, we are influenced by what each makes possible and how they have been used by others to make figures or create games. We are called upon to draw on all our most relevant experiences to enable us to engage with a comparatively open-ended process. We explore what we think we know and then we have to experiment, learn through doing and as such we may be more open to unanticipated questions. As suggested previously, we also have to be on the look-out for the suggestiveness of materials and the way they shape participants' use of them, so that we do not over attribute meaning to particular decisions.

Classie and Sun further acknowledge the repertoires of experiences and understandings each participant brings to the research process. They refer to it as a co-construction of knowledge, a 'recreation' (chapter 7 para 3) and a remixing of ideas. As previously noted, creativity is often assumed to be the spontaneous work of individuals who possess genius; originality is most highly prized. Classie and Sun by contrast refer to a collaborative dialogue which requires constraints, rules or guidelines in order to create a structure in which a creative design process could properly address the concerns of children. They too find that if by drawing on our previous experiences to recreate something new or to 'redesign' we are able to share our understandings of and affiliations to particular cultural texts, games or activities. This is especially useful in the research process. In, what can be thought of as a remixing process, participants make explicit their existing experiences and understandings whilst also reaching towards new ideas and importantly new questions.

In conclusion, I suggest that arts based research, including media production, invites participants to draw on their previous experiences to explore and express ideas, remixing them into a new design which stimulates new questions and tentative and contextualised understandings of the world. This is not to say that the creative process should be undertaken without help or guidance from skilled practitioners but acknowledges that the very process of collaboration between artists, educators, researchers and children, potentially prompts a rich dialogue in which meaning is co-constructed. It is important to say that it is not the case that children can only respond to visual or participatory methods (Christensen and James, 2000) but this level of creativity and reflexivity potentially enhances opportunities for engagement in

the research process. What is more, as Eisner suggests, 'artistically crafted works' can be used in the display or dissemination of research findings in ways that make 'aspects of the world vivid and generate a sense of empathy' (Eisner 1993, p.10). In the current and subsequent chapter attention has been paid to the creative process, the role of remixing and the need for a tolerance of mess. These concerns are perhaps a helpful indication of an emerging set of criteria through which we evaluate an arts based research process, avoiding an all too frequent tendency to use the existing vocabulary of positivist or scientific research as a critical or reflective tool.

Arts based research shifts the role of the researcher away from the distant, objective observer to a context in which the researcher becomes a co-creator and sharer of stories, provocations and ideas, a facilitator and collaborator. This importantly represents a shift away from the individual adult researcher, attempting to answer a specific research question relating to children. The neat, tidy, traditional approach to obtaining data all too often ignores the messy reality of children's lives and experiences and in doing so potentially sweeps under the carpet their concerns and cultures. Rather than focusing on a single issue, or using a fancy new device to measure eye movement, we should be concerned we ensure that research methodology emerges from and is informed by children's cultural, social and creative contexts. As the old adage goes, 'you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs'. So too, we cannot create new knowledge and understanding of the world without taking it apart and putting it back together again in new ways and that means making and living with mess.

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