Visual methods for encouraging adult-child dialogue in Scotland

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Chapter 9: Visual methods for encouraging dialogue between young children and adults

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Intent

This case study is drawn from a longitudinal research study that took place in two primary schools in Scotland over the course of a year. The aim of the study was to explore young children’s experiences of the visual arts in and out of school. Supporting children to express their voice was key to the study. A research design was created which acknowledged that children have their own voice from birth and that the adult role is to support and enable that voice to be heard. As a lecturer and researcher from a local university, I worked in both schools with the pupils. Establishing a culture of trust between the children and me so that conversations could emerge was therefore a key element of the design. Visual and arts-informed methods were adopted.

Context/Setting

This case study focuses on a subsection of a larger study; four children from two Scottish primary schools took part. Both schools followed the same curriculum and children were aged between 7 and 8 at the time of the study. Maia and Clara were friends and belonged to the same class in a school located in an area of high deprivation. Jake and Edward were also friends who belonged to the same class in a school in a different part of the same city.

Data were gathered at five different points during an academic school year (Figure 1); in Scotland, the school year begins in August and ends in June. Most of the data were gathered in the schools, beginning in November and finishing at the start of June. One activity, an art workshop, took place at a local creative space in the city and this occurred in April. Each child completed the same set of activities during the study except for Edward who was not able to attend the art workshop.

Visual and arts-informed methods were adopted. Visual methods consist of activities which have a visual element such as maps, photographs or diagrams (Veale, 2005). Arts-informed methods consist of methods which are influenced by the arts but do not require the skills of an artist (Cole and Knowles, 2008). At the start of the year, the activities were completed in groups, providing an environment for the pupils and me to get to know each other. Individual sessions were then introduced. Discussion and conversation therefore emerged between us during the sessions. Over the year the children’s words and images were used to create individual narratives which contained their experiences of visual art in their world.

1 All participants’ names in this paper have been changed to pseudonyms.
Case Study of Voice Practice

My beliefs were key in terms of creating a culture that underpinned the entire research design. This required time for reflection and was essential to ensure that the entire research design, from its conception to its final write-up, placed children at the centre as much as possible. It was also necessary to ensure that words, and thoughts, matched action as much as possible when conducting research in a real-world context. Creating a community with the children where discussion and conversation could occur safely was therefore key. Trust also had to be created as neither party knew the other and for this to happen, time was required. This was why the activities occurred over the course of a year, rather than try to gather everything on one occasion.

The methods used also had to reflect the culture underpinning the research. Visual and arts-informed methods were therefore employed which provided space for the children to express themselves in a visual format but could also be used to stimulate discussion and conversation. By doing this, the children were the constructors of knowledge and guided the direction of the research, to enable a shared understanding of their world and experiences to emerge. Three tools were effective: collage, agree/disagree boards and photo-elicitation.

Collage

The first data-gathering session was designed both as an opportunity for the children and I to get to know each other, but also as an opportunity for each child to express their identity in a visual way. Collage was selected as the arts-informed method, with each child given an A4 piece of paper and a range of paper-based materials such as magazines and leaflets, in order to create a collage about
themselves (see Image 1). This was a medium that I enjoy working with and I introduced the activity by showing the children a collage I had created as a child.

Image 1: Collage created by Clara

After the introduction, I kept my involvement in the activity to a minimum, answering queries or supporting children to find certain images. It was important that the children had ownership throughout the activity. Maia, Clara, Jake and Edward seemed confident to complete the activity without my support and completed the task in different ways; they either cut out all their images first or cut and pasted as they progressed. Each collage had a distinct visual style: Clara chose to leave white space around certain images (Image 1), while Maia decided to fill the paper with as many images as possible (Image 2).

Image 2: Collage created by Maia

The collage provided each child with the opportunity to express their likes and dislikes, and they all attached stories providing glimpses of their world outside the classroom. For example Maia said of her collage that “...I chose toys because I always like to play with them and I love them and I also like jewellery and I like flowers and I’ve a gogo box and I like facepaint and I like dogs, I like cats, I like cooking, I like my phone, phones and me and my mum like this game, I think it’s called Pole or something? We like that game and I like to play it with her and I also like Minecraft”.

Agree/Disagree Board

Image 1: Agree/Disagree board

The visual method of an Agree/Disagree board was used to explore children’s thoughts on art. This board is a discussion tool in classrooms with statements placed on the board by the children depending on whether they agree or disagree with them. In this case however images of visual art were given to the children and they were asked to place these images on the board depending on whether or not they thought they were examples of art. Each child completed a board and a photograph was taken.

It was fascinating to listen to the discussion that was stimulated as the children outlined their reasoning for their decisions. When discussing the placement of a photograph of a sculpture (in Disagree, top left of Image 3) Edward for example stated that “It is a sculpture like and plus it is art but not like drawing art”, the implication being that drawing was more art than sculpture. The children also felt that if the image was too realistic it could not be a work of art; as Jake said of the detail of a bunch of asparagus from a Dutch master (which he placed in Disagree) “It looks like cigarettes...It just looks like a picture, that’s been taken”. In this activity, the role of the adult was kept to a minimum, providing prompt questions when appropriate to encourage the children to expand their discussion. This meant that on the whole the children led the activity. It was also an activity which had no right or wrong answers; the children could see this and discuss their individual responses.

Photo-Elicitation
Finally, a method called photo-elicitation was used (Rose, 2016). Each child was given a disposable camera. Over the course of a month they were asked to take photos of places where they experienced art, or that were important to them. In individual sessions, the children then selected seven images that they wanted to talk about. The variety in each set of photographs was marked.

For example, Clara’s (Image 4) and Maia’s photographs, were taken within the home environment, while Jake and Edward’s (Image 5) photographs consisted of a mixture of images taken at home and the local environment. The interesting aspect of each set of images was what was missing such as examples of art-viewing in traditional sites such as an art gallery, or examples of art-making occurring in the home.

In contrast to an activity where an adult asks a child a question, this activity was guided by the children and what they wanted to talk about or reveal to me, therefore it provided an insight into what was relevant to them and not the adult. The challenge for the adult is that you are often presented with some unexpected images and you have to adjust your understanding and responses as a result. For example, Clara’s photographs consisted primarily of her pets and not images of art. The images were used to create digital photocollages by myself for each participant, each with their own distinct personality and character (Images 4 and 5); this activity provided an opportunity for me to create my own visual response to the project, and allowed for some comparison to be made between the participants, without losing the sense of the individual.

Reflections on Voice Practice

Through the design of the research and the visual data tools that were employed it was possible to create and present four individual cases studies which demonstrated the depth and breadth of visual art experiences that young children in a Scottish city encountered in their daily lives. The methods supported the presentation of multiple interpretations of the experiences. The results of each activity created spaces for stories to emerge from the children, but they also highlighted what was not present in their lives. In addition to this, and a feature of working with this age group (7 and 8 year olds), the children were able to justify and discuss the choices that they made in relation to the visual image. This resulted in the children having a significant level of control over what would be discussed and presented, particularly in the photo-elicitation, but also in the activities that required them to select images and talk about why they had selected them. The collage activity also meant that I had a distinct, visual image of how they viewed themselves for each individual.

The most significant challenge was collaborating with adults to find time and spaces for the children to engage with the activities. Both schools and universities work to busy schedules and this meant that co-ordinating sessions that suited all the adults involved, including myself, was tricky. The issue of adults as gatekeepers was therefore a prevalent one for all concerned and was something that I reflected on continuously throughout the research. On the part of adults, an understanding and a belief in voice is essential and provides the foundations for building upon however the trickier part is implementing the theory and enabling this to happen in order to create a culture where the voices of children are embedded and respected in daily living.
Link to Talking Point Posters
- Agree to disagree (Culture)
- Create Communities where adults and children converse with each other (Culture)
- Starting with the ethics: the child at the centre (Culture)
- Co-Creation of Artefact (Culture)
- Time must be given to voice (Listen with Purpose)
- Be Supportive of Conversations Where Children Express Themselves (Listening with Purpose)

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Key References
