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Positioning children as artists through a ceramic arts project and exhibition: children meaning making

This article describes a ceramic arts research project that provided children with opportunities for meaning making using bone china clay, a medium with strong cultural and historical links to the city where the research took place. The children were positioned as artists and their work was curated and presented for exhibition by an international ceramic artist, affording equal status to their work as that of adults. Findings identified that children made meaning based on experience, popular culture, unique family and cultural heritage, and school identities. It is also acknowledged that adult attitudes can both enable and limit children's creativity. The professional exhibition of the children's work validated children's knowledge and agency and further contested how children's work is valued and exhibited within school settings.

Keywords: art; creativity; meaning making; participation and agency; exhibition

1: Introduction and Context.

This project aimed to bring together children, (and families), teachers, artists, lecturers, and students in an open-ended exploration of expression through the visual languages of clay, image and drawing to communicate ideas and feelings and to share meanings. In particular, our intention was to enable children to envisage new ways of knowing and being made possible outside dominant narratives of knowledge production within formal educational settings (Moss, 2018). Here we contest powerful ideas about knowledge as an objective reality by adopting a post-structural position where knowledge and learning are always part of relational practice within social and cultural contexts; thereby creating new possibilities of both being and imagining.

Yates & Twigg (2016) suggest that children's creative opportunities are   limited by an outcome-driven curriculum pedagogy which inhibits children's creative expressions; furthermore, creativity is a contested concept (Aubrey & Dahl, 2013) and often manifests within formal settings through an instruction-based approach which encourages similar outcomes and products from children (Duffy, 2006). This research adopted a participatory and democratic approach to creativity which foregrounds children's meaning making and reflects the resourcefulness and agency implicit in Craft's (2001) concept of 'little c creativity'. This provides the potential for children to identify themselves as artists and understand creativity as a process which is not bounded by curriculum outcomes but controlled by the maker's own choices and decisions. The values and principles within the project validated children's voice and agency (Szenasi, 2010), valuing their ideas and contributions through documentation and exhibition (Moss & Clark, 2011). Horgan (2017) suggests that participatory research relies on co-production of knowledge through relationships. Furthermore, participatory research can provide opportunities for skill sharing, collaboration and reflective learning between artists, teachers and children (Aubrey & Dahl, 2013). This paper aims to describe the process by which meaning was constructed by the children, teachers, researchers and artist involved in the project. We further posit that the curation and exhibition of children's work as art affords value and acknowledges children's agency and knowledge production.

2. Literature

2.1 *Theorising childhood within research*

Lundy & McEvoy (2011) assert that the way that researchers view children and childhood impacts on how research is conducted. This was emphasised in the 'new'

sociology of childhood which created a shift of thinking in relation to how children are positioned in research as *subjects* rather than *objects* within all aspects of research design and process (James and Prout, 1997). The last few decades have shown a strong consensus within critical early childhood studies that research should foreground children's own perspectives or *voice* (Noppari, Uusitalo & Kupiainen, 2017). Therefore, research *with* children and *listening* to children have become key components of this paradigm shift. The value of participatory research with children, which involves children creatively within research methodology are well documented (see Murray, 2016, Pascal & Bertram, 2009, Parson, Sherwood & Abbott, 2016).However, the meanings that are attached to 'voice' and participation are not without ambiguity. For example, research which claims 'authenticity' of the child's voice as central to the research methodology need to interrogate critically the dialogic relationship with the researcher (Spyrou et al, 2019) to avoid decontextualising discourses of power present in every encounter between adults and children.

Furthermore, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UNICEF, 2010) which was ratified by the UK in 1991 positioned children as right holders, and in particular, within Article 12 that children have a right to have a voice and to express their views and opinions. Furthermore, specifically Article 31 states that children have a right to 'take part in a wide range of cultural and artistic activities' (UNICEF, 2010).Lundy (2007) critically analyses the article's ability for children to be meaningfully engaged in the context of decision making and to express their views. She suggests that children must be provided with the space, voice, audience and influence in order for their views to be heard, which aligns to EECERA's ethical research code for

all aspects of Early Childhood research (Bertram, Formosinho, Gray, Pascal and Whalley 2015)

The notion of participation is strongly present within this research as 'young children desire to have their creative ideas and thoughts heard.' (Green, 2012:271). Multiple strategies were conceived in order to provide them with opportunities to talk about, represent, and show the places and ideas that were important to them at each stage of the process. This research thus engages with ethical principles of respect for the child, its family and community promoted through EECERA's democratic values such as social justice and equity (Bertram et.al. 2015, v).

2.2 *Children's performing identities as 'artists' and 'pupils'*

Identities are fluid and socially and relationally constructed through time place and culture (Osgood 2012:66). Subjectivities are therefore continually constructed and reconstructed according to hierarchies of power and privilege 'sometimes creating receptive, friendly environments, at other times becoming oppositional or indifferent'. (Lind, 2005: 266). Our intention within the project was to minimise hierarchies of power and create receptive environments for construction of new possibilities and identities. Within early education, children are used to performing as 'pupils' framed by curriculum expectations and communicated through the 'hidden curriculum' of the school. Classroom layout and practices reveal expectations, behaviours and 'normative characteristics we expect children to develop and internalise' (Blundell, 2016:77). This includes the regulation of both emotions and bodies reflected in how children should, sit, move, listen and act. (Harden 2012) Similarly, valid knowledge is framed by the curriculum, with schooled constructs differing from home constructs, for example in reading (Levy, 2011). For these reasons, we chose to remove children from the school

environment in order to open up new possibilities and identities informed by Deleuze -

Guttarian concepts of striated and smoothed space. As Davies (2014:26) notes,

'Smooth space enables an immersion in the present moment, in time and in space, that

often eludes us in the press of normative expectations, of habitually repeated thoughts

and practices and structures'. Smoothed space therefore allows for new possibilities of

being, or new 'lines of flight.' (Davies, 2014). Studio space due to its relational nature

offers the potential for 'Deleuze- Guttarian affect' as opposed to the striated spaces of

the classroom and the school curriculum (Pente, Massing and Kirova 2018: 116). Affect

describes the potentiality of any given body (human or non-human) in combination with

other bodies to create something new and surprising (Davies 2014). In the workshops,

our intention was to provide space for children to express their own ideas outside of the

confines of schooled knowledge to produce artefacts for a collaborative exhibition.

Young children often experience 'art' and 'artists' within early education

through popular art works, for example, The Snail by Matisse, or the 'Sunflowers' of

Van Gogh. This positions the artist within Craft's (2001) big 'C 'concept of creativity',

as one whose works has been ascribed value according to the rules of the field

(Bourdieu, 1997, in Alanen, 2015). The value of children's art making however is

defined by current pedagogy and curriculum, and further complicated by practitioners'

shifting conceptions of creativity (Twigg and Yates 2019, Durham commission 2019)

therefore, children's own ideas, interests and knowledge are not always valued and their

art making opportunities limited by content of the curriculum and the interest of

individual teachers. Further, the Durham Commission (2019:7) note socio -economic

factors impact on children's opportunities to be creative.

'There is a huge disparity in teaching for creativity between schools, often reflecting socioeconomic factors. We have found that the independent sector is better resourced in schools that teach for creativity. The evidence shows that teaching for creativity confers personal, economic and social advantage. As a matter of social justice and national interest it should be available to all young people, not only to those who can afford it.

In this project we afforded children opportunities to experience art as a process of trial and error, decision making, choices and evaluation which is within everyone's capacity, framed by Craft's (2001) little 'c' concept. We further acted as 'significant others' to validate the work through professional curation and public exhibition to support children's creative identities (Glaveanu and Tanngard, 2014). Children need opportunities for art making, aesthetic awareness and appreciation, but these must 'respect the cultural interests of the unique and individual child' (Tan and Gibson 2017:297). We recognise that children are capable of reflecting upon the value of their own work and that of professional artists, yet they are largely unheard, so we provided opportunities for them to do this as part of our ethical principles aligned to EECERA's ethical code (Bertram, et al, 2015) .

2.3 *Young children making meaning through visual arts and crafts*
We make meaning and communicate through 'multiple literacies', co-constructed through processes of dialogue, reflection and interpretation in relationship with others (Moss 2016:11). Despite this, the dominant role of policy and curriculum within the UK, places high value on the symbol systems of literacy and numeracy, minimising the role of the visual arts and crafts (Wright 2010). As a result, children's ideas and interests are unheard in favour of a curriculum that values pre-identified, measurable goals using these dominant symbol systems. Multiple literacies include non- textual

modes of communication, such as 'print, images, sound and gestures' (Binder 2014: 12). Furthermore, meaning -making is culturally situated and multi-modal (Pahl, 1996), encompassing talk, drawing, singing, play and the use of digital media (Haas Dyson, 2016).

The multiplicity of meaning making is reflected in Malaguzzi's (1999) 'Hundred Languages of Children' and exemplified in the pedagogy adopted within the pre-schools of Reggio Emilia. This approach foregrounds a strong emphasis on listening to children, allowing them to follow their own interests and to construct meanings through exploration with a range of media and materials (Vecchi 2010). Craft (2001) suggested that we all have the capacity to be creative, but the opportunity to explore and develop this capacity depends on opportunities for 'possibility thinking' which describes moving from 'what is' to 'what might be possible' and relies on ownership of the task. We planned the workshops fluidly to allow for possible 'lines of flight' as described by Deleuze, 'the idea of a new thought shooting off after an encounter with difference' (Moss 2019:112) rather than within the 'rigid lines' of the curriculum. Visual arts and craft offer children fluid boundaries where they have 'control of what they want to say and how they want to say it, in a free form way' (Wright 2010:7) offering children 'freedom of voice'. This allows them to actively construct meaning about their world and their experiences, rather than being 'passive recipients of knowledge' (Wright 2010:7). Pictorial languages therefore, can be a useful resource for children's meaning - making and communication in diverse and multilingual classrooms. (Binder, 2014).

2.4 *Participation and Agency*

Research can be experienced as disempowering for children due to the multiple-power relations present between children and adults (Rogers and Labadie, 2016) and classroom

dynamics that work against fairness and collegiality. In this regard, children are not exempt from power differences that are 'ascribed to different groups of children' Kellett (2010 in Horgan, 2017:249)

'This can result in an emphasis on consultation which, although worthwhile, carries the risk of tokenism and in its most negative form serves to legitimise local, government or school policy' (Horgan 2017:247). The concept of children's participation is therefore contested within research and can take many forms, however, for genuine participation to be envisioned it needs to be closely aligned to principles of social justice and democratic practice (Peters, 2020). Within early childhood education and care social justice can encompass anti-oppressive and culturally inclusive education which 'address issues of fairness and unfairness, and privileges cultural funds of knowledge' (Peters, 2020: 88, Bertram et. al., 2016, v). Children enact their personal and social identities in early childhood which includes complex issues related to race/racism, social class differences, gender identities and other significant topics relevant to their lives.

The challenge of this project, which took place in a multi-ethnic/lingual community where many children and their families have experienced recent migration histories, was to develop a democratic research ethic that redistributes relationships of power by validating children's agency (Pascal & Bertram, 2009; Bertram et.al., 2016).The school was situated within an 'opportunity area' which while suggesting positive changes points to the area as 'failing' in comparison to the more economically affluent areas within the city. This stigmatisation of the neighbourhood, fails to recognise the positive lived experiences such an area can provide for its inhabitants. This in turn can influence the 'self –image and life chances of residents' (Permentier,van Ham and Bolt 2009 in Marsh 2016 p.18) Oswell (2013) asserts that

children are social actors and have potential for autonomy, power and influence over the construction of their own lives. Children are therefore valuable and active contributors to society and have the power to influence processes and structures that affect their daily life experiences. Central to the ideas of participation, social justice, democratic practice and children's agency is listening to children and understanding their ideas and opinions on matters that affect their everyday life experiences. This is significant within Early Childhood research that needs to show a deep respect for children's voices', whilst validating their diversity of experiences within different lived realities (Bertram et.al., 2016).

3. Methods

This was a qualitative research study which involved 120 year 1 and year 2 children in an East Midlands inner city primary school. The sample included children and families from multi-lingual backgrounds with diverse cultural heritage. The older-age group was selected due to the health and safety involved in the use of ceramic materials. Eight second year students from the BA (hons) Early Childhood Studies degree and 1 student from a Master's degree in Childhood volunteered to take part; all had a DBS check as part of their programme. An internationally recognised, ceramic artist with strong links to the city and its cultural institutions also participated in the research.

The research project adopted an interpretive paradigm and made use of multi-methods of data collection and documentation including, children's drawings, voices, photographs, and artefacts, field notes, reflections and audio recordings. A reflexive approach was considered as part of interpreting children's meaning making through detailed discussions of findings with an aim to provide 'thick description' (Pahl, 1999:13). As Green (2012: 278) notes, our focus was not on the artistic capabilities of

the children rather, 'attention was placed on listening to children while they created their representations, in order to gain insight into their perspectives'. The results from the three elements of the research were collated and inductive coding was used to extrapolate key themes in relation to meaning making as follows; 1. Children's meaning making using own ideas and imagination 2.Children performing school knowledge 3.Exhibition as meaning making; We further comment upon the role of the adults in both enabling and constraining meaning making.

3.1 *Ethics*

As previously indicated, the project was framed using EECERA Ethical Code for Early Childhood Researchers (Bertram et al, 2015) and approved according to the University's ethical procedures. Informed consent was sought from the gatekeeper of the setting and parents of children, for their participation in the project and for voice recordings to take place. The aims of the project were explained in pre-visits to the school and children were asked for consent to take part, to which they all agreed enthusiastically. They were also given opportunities to share their ideas about the theme and consider what was important to them. Further consent was gained from the children to exhibit their drawings and clay artefacts, but the work was returned to the school following exhibition. To avoid decontextualising discourses of power as referred to by Spyrou (2019) children participated as much or as little as they chose and were encouraged to follow their own interests throughout the project. Adults made notes and voice recordings to ensure that children's meanings were ascribed to their drawings and artefacts, rather than the interpretation of adults and initials were used in the display to protect the children's identities. Children's assent was continually sought throughout the project (Rogers & Labadie, 2018) but we acknowledge the power differential between

adults and children and recognise that it may have been difficult for some children to decline to take part ; nevertheless, on the day of the workshops one child decided to remain at school demonstrating that participation was a choice. Furthermore, in the studio, we provided a book corner to enable withdrawal from the workshop, this was used by some children but only after they had completed their artefacts. The decision making regarding levels of participation and production were firmly within the children's control but they all made multiple artefacts and remained engaged thoughout. We therefore prioritised an inclusive and participatory methodology, framed within ethical principles of inclusion, democracy and collaboration which somewhat ameliorated power differentials between the researchers and the children (Parsons, Sherwood & Abbott, 2016).

Based on our interactions with the school, we recognised that time constraints on the children and practitioners limited their opportunities to fully engage in the production of the exhibition. The decision making regarding the final exhibition therefore lay with the artist and researchers due to our experience of curating professional art exhibitions; as a result, the children's work was valued and displayed as equivalent to art produced by adults using muted colours, careful framing and neutral background colours. This was a conscious and purposeful decision and took considerable time and thought. Much of children's artwork in schools is presented using primary colours and unnecessary additions which can detract from the child's production and overpower the work. The height of the work however was lowered to make it accessible for children. Clark (2016:341) identifies the value of the expert (artists and filmmakers) in relation to presenting visual research in early childhood 'to

represent visual research narratives in more innovative ways and to give more academic weight to multisensory explorations of children's lives.'

3.2 *Procedure*

Pre visits were made to the school to explain the project, build relationships and to gain consent. Children had opportunities to work with bone china clay to explore its properties and were encouraged to think about the theme of Earth, Water, Air. This was purposely broad to allow for children's individual ideas and interests, we were keen to avoid an outcomes-based approach and to encourage 'possibility thinking' (Craft, Mc Connan & Matthews, 2012) and enable possible 'lines of flight' (Moss, 2018). The children then visited an existing ceramic window installation completed by the artist located in the museum of a local ceramics factory as inspiration. Following this, they visited their local park (located behind the ceramics factory) for further inspiration and to photograph, sketch and document their ideas and collect objects of interest. Subsequently, the children attended ceramic workshops at the university to produce ceramic artefact/s of their choice. The final exhibition, which took place in Autumn 2018, was curated by the artist and documented the whole project through images, sketches and ceramic artefacts. The exhibition was located in the Orangery, a culturally historic building located in the park which was easily accessible for children and their families and the wider community.

Figure 1. Window Installation.

Figure 2. Close up of window.

Figure 3. The Orangery.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. *Theme 1: Meaning Making – Children's own ideas, voice and imagination*

In the pre-visits to the school the researchers introduced the project and discussed the university and the clay workshops. The children recognised that universities were for teenagers and *'big* people' to learn and described their understanding of a university through their home and family experiences; *'My big brother / cousin goes there' 'My uncle goes to Birmingham'.* Conceptualisations of artists included *'making things'* and another said *'they can create'* demonstrating understanding of the use of various materials. The children's questions to the artist about the bone china window, clearly demonstrated their ability to reflect upon professional art suggested by Tan and Gibson (2017). Questions included *'how long did it take?'* and *'how was the design made'.* One child asked *'Did you like doing art?'* The artist gave an honest answer regarding the difficulty of using the material, breakages, and the time and decision making involved in the process. Some children had little understanding of the properties and uses of clay, one stating confidently *'We are made of clay'* which may reflect the limited use of the material in schools currently underlined by recent reports (Cooper, 2018,).

At the museum, children were excitable and enthusiastic possibly due to the change of environment. Deleuze suggests that new learning is always relational and occurs as a result of encounters with difference, the unknown and the unfamiliar which allow us to experiment and innovate (Moss,2018: 111). At the ceramic window, children had the opportunity to observe, ask questions, make comments and to produce their own responses. The children again demonstrated their capacity to reflect upon the artwork through some pertinent questions such as *'How does the light shine through*?' and *'Why are some left?'.* The artist explained the translucent properties of bone china tiles, a property that is utilised by contemporary artists working in this medium. The

second question related to that fact that some of the panels were left blank. This may reveal children's expectations from school, for example, children are often required to fill up space on a page, (this was encouraged by some of the adults when children were drawing). The artist explained that when she put the installation together it looked '*too busy, too much'*, so she left some panels blank. She explained that sometimes we think things will look good together but when we try them, it is not always how we imagine '*in our head'*. Here she introduced judgement, decision making, and quality control based on aesthetic awareness as suggested by Tan and Gibson (2017). She also enabled children to view art making as a process involving trial and error and changing of minds; within schools, we argue, there are limited opportunities to do this due to time limits and the structured nature of the school day. The children were very keen to draw and continued in a calm, quiet and focussed way, there was a marked difference in noise and talking at this point. Csikszentmihalyi (1997) terms this 'flow', characterised by intense concentration and deep enjoyment. He suggests that flow occurs when children engage in autotelic, self -rewarding activities; arguably, children were in 'flow' here. Some produced very detailed and realistic observational drawings of what they could see on the panels, but others were more experimental, using abstract shapes and patterns. Few children had visited the museum before despite it being very close to their locality, comments included, '*I wish I could stay there my whole life'* and another, '*I wish I could sleep there'* possibly reflecting an encounter with difference.

The local park was a familiar space to the children and their families reflected in their responses and they soon found interesting, sensory items which inspired them; "*Baby rocks – they kind of dead*", "*it feels like a dragon's scales".* Here children recognised that the park is an inclusive place and acknowledged relationships 'in their

common world's human, (place) and more-than-human relations' with plants and animals (Iorio and Tanabe, 2020: 121). They used their imaginations when encountering objects within the environment creating new meaning from stones, tree bark and sticks. Here we engage with Deleuze's notion of knowledge as rhizome which has no fixed beginning or end 'It is a multiplicity functioning by means of connections and heterogeneity, a multiplicity which is not given but constructed' (Moss, 2018: 117), rather than a fixed, ordered, linear process with a rational start and finish. When children move away from linear thinking they are able to formulate new connections from the more-than-human world, thus encountering more possibilities of thinking and knowledge. For example, a group of children were discussing the dirty water in the water fountain. One child said that you are meant to make wishes in fountains but couldn't in this one because it was disgusting and full of bugs! Another child said that *'the fish might not want to live there as they wouldn't be able to see out of their windows'*. The colour of the water was dark green, discarded bottles, leaves and sticks were just visible in the water. '*It's like an arm*!' shouted one boy pointing at a large stick in the water. One child was interested in increasing sizes of sticks, she commented on how she would not be able to put them in her bag, although one of them she could use as a bench; "*a very big branch*". A boy used his stick to show its use, "*look at my fishing rod*". New ideas emerge through 'assemblages' creating new perspectives and rich opportunities for children to visualise objects such as sticks and branches into new possibilities (Aubrey & Dahl, 2013). Children drew on their cultural knowledge in their explorations and observations which they shared with their peers. One child noticed a young sampling protected by a wire cage. "*It's because it's growing – they do it in Pakistan but with bricks*". The children's imagination and agency were apparent in their

drawings and many followed their own story agendas. These examples demonstrate children's interests and reflect the enabling roles of the adults involved.

On arrival at the university for the clay workshops, the children were excited and interested to complete the work with the clay. Children were surprised at having control over their work asking '*can I do anything, even football*?' again reflecting the enabling role of the adults. Some attempted experimental approaches which considered the potentiality of the material, using the tools and found objects from the park in innovative ways to produce abstract patterns and marks. One commented '*I am making patterns, I am using this" (pointing to a rawl plug).* Others explored with 3D approaches by cutting, rolling and shaping the clay into overlapping squares, clay strips and layers, one child produced a pattern *'like a floor'* another said, *'I am going to make a volcano".* One child was observed by the artist *"... he was rolling the clay into balls and made solid lumps"* Another child said' *I like it with clay, you can make different things.'* These examples demonstrate possibility thinking (Craft, Mc Connon & Matthews, 2012) which shifts from 'orthodox thinking' the familiar and the known and moves into the realm of potentiality or the unknown (Moss, 2019). Here we felt, 'lines of flight' were explored as children started to explore with the potentiality of the material and surprised themselves with their productions. *'I am actually good at this, look what I have done here!' 'Look I can do this, I am good at this aren't I? I'm gonna be an artist! Do you want to know how I did this?")* These two children not only recognised their capacity for identifying as an artist but also assumed the role of 'expert' by offering to explain their achievements to the adult. This aligns with the findings of Tan and Gibson (2017); the children in their research considered themselves as artists and recognised that skills and techniques in art making develop with age and experience.

Many of the children produced multiple pieces, experimenting with different approaches each time, clearly developing skills and honing techniques through trial and error. One child struggled initially with what to do and produced 'practice pieces' then continued to produce his final piece which incorporated all of the techniques he had tried. There were numerous cultural references within the children's creations including, Homer Simpson's hair, the popular game 'Fortnite' and lots of football references, ' *I am doing a football", "Look this is the striker!"* due to the project coinciding with the world cup. Other personal experiences that influenced designs, included the Audi logo, '*mum's tattoo'* and chapattis and pepperoni pizzas. Two children produced very detailed patterns that were reminiscent of the intricate henna tattoos on their hands and arms at the time. These examples clearly reflect the culturally situated nature of meaning making (Pahl, 1996, Tan & Gibson 2017).

After the workshops, children were asked how it felt to be an artist and one response was '*you have to work hard to be an artist'* acknowledging the effort and decision making involved. We hoped to suggest the identity of artist to them as a possibility, rather than as an identity adopted by others; it was clear that some children were inspired by using the clay; one child wanted to know where to buy it and another said, '*I want to learn more about doing clay'* and '*I want to come to this school when I am big'.*

Figure 4. Workshops.

Figure 5. Workshops**.**

4.2 *Theme 2: Meaning Making: Children performing school knowledge.*

 During the pre-visits the purpose of a university was clearly conceptualised through the children's experiences of performing as pupils in school, with one child mentioning

'they do homework, do good sitting, do listening, being good and thinking', reflecting the ideas of Harden (2012) regarding the regulation of bodies and emotions in school. Another child mentioned that his big brother learned *'about volcanoes'* possibly an area of study fitting for 'big people'. Children's conceptualisations of an artist revolved around painting and drawing *'nice things'* suggesting the importance of value and the recognition of Craft's (2001) 'Big C' concept of creativity or the artist as 'genius'. This might illustrate their own experiences of art in school or may replicate the dominant construction of art as 'painting.'

The children's performance as pupils was very clear within the museum and the regulation of their bodies and emotions by the adults was illustrated. Health and safety concerns were paramount in the teacher's and other adults' performance through instructions to hold hands, stay in lines, to look where they were going listen carefully and to put up hands to speak. The artist and the lecturers however, tried to minimise these hierarchical relationships by both inviting and responding to children's spontaneous questions and comments as valid. The regulatory and risk averse approach to field trips outside of school property is commonplace and was clearly reflected here. Furthermore, practitioners may have mixed views on the value and appropriateness of museum and art gallery experiences for children or may lack confidence in their own abilities to support and control children's behaviour within these environments (Terreni, 2017). Adult attitudes to the value of field trips can therefore influence children's creative opportunities positively or negatively.

During the park visits there were many examples of the children performing as 'pupils'. Some of the children were keen to write rather than draw; *'I'm writing the name bird'* and a number of them produced lists of words or labelled their drawings

carefully. One child said '*I done some not real words and some real words*' (showing two lists of words, one under an X another under a tick). This may reflect the year 1 phonics check within the UK curriculum, where children decode 'real' and 'nonsense' words phonetically. This could illustrate the high status placed upon symbol systems within education identified by Wright (2010) that has been internalised by the children. The adult responded positively, but the child approached the researcher twice more for validation of this knowledge. Inadvertently, the researcher may not have responded as an educator would, due to her own expectations of the project therefore limiting the child's exploration. As Davies (2014:28) notes,

> 'lines of descent and their striations, are always waiting to reassert themselves…
> As adults working and playing with children, we may inadvertently import those
> striations and initiate those lines of descent through unexamined desires.'

As researchers, it is therefore vitally important to continually reflect upon our own aims and expectations. Children's funds of knowledge are gained through life experiences within families and communities, but also through school knowledge and practices (Gonzalez et al., 2005). It could be suggested that some children actively appropriated cultural practices such as 'writing' beyond the confines of the school environment, resisting the instruction of 'drawing', therefore enacting agency as part of their constructed identities as school children

The children made efforts to demonstrate their schooled knowledge to the researchers by giving the names of the plants and flowers and natural processes such as "*this is pollination*" and pointing out possible dangers. '*You can bump yourself on them (rocks), even if there is a tiny one, you can hurt yourself on them, or if it is spikey*'. Health and safety concerns were clear; one child asked, '*Can we climb the rocks, is it safe?*' another asked, "*is it safe to sit on?*". They were encouraged to explore but given warnings to mind the stinging nettles and not to touch things. Yates and Oates (2019)

suggest that some children are risk averse at a very young age, but this may be due to internalising adult fears about outdoor environments (Blundell 2016). Two children pointed excitedly to some large fungi, but were warned that some 'mushrooms' are poisonous, this led to a brief discussion about which mushrooms were poisonous and which were not poisonous *'like red ones are'* further demonstrating children's school knowledge about safety.

In the clay workshops we wanted to provide 'smoothed space' as opposed to the 'striated space' of the classroom governed by linear progression and pre - determined goals, (Moss, 2018) but as a result some children struggled with freedom of choice and appeared unsure of what to do. This could be a result of the prescribed outcomes and goal-oriented experiences available within schools. Many of the children used their slab of clay as a piece of paper to 'draw' on; some children made spontaneous drawings and marks but continued to add more detail until their original ideas were barely visible. There appeared to be a need to fill up blank space or possibly they were just unsure of when to stop; in schools there is an emphasis on predictable and desired outputs (Duffy, 2006). Golomb (cited in Wright 2010:4) notes that composition in art is a process of revision, decision making and evaluation, so the time scale of the workshop may have been a limiting factor on the children's opportunities to do this. Some children presented landscapes, with grass, trees and a sun in the top of the space, while others produced detailed, realistic, depictions such as trees, leaves, flowers and butterflies (the word 'realistic' was used frequently by the teachers in their discussions). Familiar, realistic depictions, or what Deleuze would describe as 'orthodox thought' (Moss 2018:110), may have been considered as holding more value as schooled knowledge rather than abstract or experimental approaches.

Figure 6. Final Exhibition

4.3. *Theme 3 Meaning Making: Exhibition as validation of knowledge*

The value of the arts as cultural capital has been recently discussed (Durham commission report, 2019) and it was our intention to validate the children's work through a professional exhibition in their local area. The children's work was therefore exhibited in a community art gallery in an historic building and professionally curated by the artist and lecturers as equivalent to art produced by adults. The Orangery has strong historical links with the arts as cultural capital, built by a local philanthropist in 1800's and located in the first public park in England. The exhibition space is normally dominated by adult work therefore we aimed to contest the way that children's work is valued and exhibited separately from adult work. Furthermore we aimed to contest the way that children's art work is presented within school and other environments constructed by adults (Blundell, 2016); often using bright primary colours and unnecessary additions, so we purposefully used muted colours, careful framing and neutral backgrounds. The building is located in a public park that is frequented by the whole local community, thereby we hoped to enable access to the exhibition to all, including those who may not access art in more formal institutions. We aimed to promote principles of social justice and democratic practice by validating children's funds of knowledge as valuable, legitimate, culturally inclusive (Peters, 2020) and as equal to that of adults. Indeed, this was accepted by the audience, many of whom assumed the work was produced by adults. The creativity, diversity of ideas and individuality were recognised by many visitors, one stating '*there are so many messages here..*'. The acknowledgment of children as artists was clear from audience

responses recorded in the visitor's book and the quality of the children's work unquestioned and celebrated. As one visitor noted,

> ' If the art world has been very successful at borrowing what is traditionally understood as a children's form (the cut out of Matisse, or the scribbles of Kandinsky) it is less successful at allowing children to enact the role of artist (which of course your project has done)'.

It is clear that adults have the power to validate or disempower children's productions both through the selection process for exhibition and also in the curation of their work. As curators we chose to include all of the work produced throughout the process to celebrate the diversity of ideas and to value children's lived experiences.

5. Conclusion

We aimed to position children as artists within this project by valuing their artworks as valid cultural productions worthy of exhibition and consideration, here we achieved our principal aims. Though the project was successful, time limits, placed upon the researchers, teachers and children constrained both the children's productions and our capturing of the process. On reflection, a closer focus on process may have been more fruitful for the project (Semenec 2018:74). While we provided the children with 'freedom of voice' (Wright, 2010) they did not participate in the decision-making processes involved in the exhibition of their work and half of the children did not visit the exhibition due to time constraints of the curriculum and the decision of adults involved. In future projects we would like to see children's increased participation in the design, planning and curation of exhibitions of their own work. Furthermore, we would like to see arts practice and exhibition valued more within schools as valuable forms of communication and knowledge production. Recent reports (Warwick Commission 2015, Cooper 2018, Durham Commission, 2019) highlight the decline in the arts and

cultural experiences over the past decade for children. Ofsted (2019:9) support these ideas and note the value of cultural capital through offering a broad curriculum which enables children to 'develop and discover their interests and talents, beyond the academic, technical or vocational'.

As Tan and Gibson (2017) note, engaging children in conversations about their art and empowering them to make their own choices and decisions ensures they remain at the heart of the meaning making process. We argue that art should take a more central role in education as it is fundamental to children's 'learning. knowing, representing and communicating' (Wright, 2010:75). We further support Wright's (2010) suggestion that the attitudes of significant adults can both limit and enhance children's creative opportunities. We successfully positioned children as valid contributors to knowledge and as artists through the professional exhibition of their work which was enjoyed and valued by the local community. Children are therefore valuable and active contributors to society and have the power to influence processes and structures that affect their daily life experiences (Oswell, 2013).

6644 words excluding References

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