

## Exploring the In-Between: An Examination of the Contextual Factors That Impact How Young Children Come to Value and Use the Visual Arts in Their Learning and Lives

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**Abstract :** The visual arts have been proven to be a central means through which young children can communicate their ideas, reflect on experience, and construct new knowledge. Despite this, perceptions of, and the degree to which the visual arts are valued within education, vary widely within political, educational, community and family contexts. These differing perceptions informed my doctoral research project, which explored the contextual factors that affect how young children come to value and use the visual arts in their lives and learning. The qualitative methodology of narrative inquiry with inclusion of arts-based methods was most appropriate for this inquiry. Using a sociocultural framework, the stories collected were analysed through the sociocultural theories of Lev Vygotsky as well as the work of Urie Bronfenbrenner, together with postmodern theories about identity formation. The use of arts-based methods such as teacher's reflective art journals and the collection of images by child participants and their parent/caregivers allowed the research participants to have a significant role in the research. Three early childhood settings at which the visual arts were deeply valued as a meaning-making device in children's learning, were purposively selected to be involved in the research. At each setting, the study found a unique and complex web of influences and interconnections, which shaped how children utilised the visual arts to mediate their thinking. Although the teachers' practices at all three centres were influenced by sociocultural theories, each settings' interpretations of these theories were unique and resulted in innovative interpretations of the role of the teacher in supporting visual arts learning. These practices had a significant impact on children's experiences of the visual arts. For many of the children involved in this study, visual art was the primary means through which they learned. The children in this study used visual art to represent their experiences, relationships, to explore working theories, their interests (including those related to popular culture), to make sense of their own and other cultures, and to enrich their imaginative play. This research demonstrates that teachers have fundamental roles in fostering and disseminating the importance of the visual arts within their educational communities.

**Keywords :** arts-based methods, early childhood education, teacher's visual arts pedagogies, visual arts

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