



Art in Early Childhood

BELONGING IN A FAMILY, BEING A GIRL AND BECOMING A WOMAN: EXPLORING ROLES AND IDENTITIES THROUGH DRAWINGS

Rosemary Richards

ABSTRACT

Children's drawings provide graphic means through which they can explore and make sense of their experiences, ideas, feelings and identities. Through the arts, as children give voice, story and image to versions of themselves and others they are influenced by images and discourses available to them. This article, which arises from Australian-based research into the nature of young children's art experiences, which spanned 10 months, focuses on Lilly who was four-years-old. Central to the Australian Early Years Learning Framework (Australian Government DEEWR, 2009) is the view of children's lives as characterised by belonging, being and becoming: belonging in families and communities, being in the here and now, and growing and becoming fully active in society. Through a selection of Lilly's drawings and comments, consideration is given to how she explored her sense of belonging in a family, being a girl and becoming a woman. Her drawings provided a means through which she formed gender schemas as she graphically scripted various personas and versions of femaleness while making sense of her world and roles within it. The educational implications of this study include supporting such explorations through the provision of art resources; sensitive and purposeful interactions with children in order to support and expand their narratives of gender identities, roles and sense of belonging; and addressing silences that may exist about gender identities and ways of being, belonging and becoming.

Keywords: Children's Drawings; Child Art; Childhood; Identities; Narratives; Gender; Sociocultural, Narrative Inquiry, Belonging, Being and Becoming.

INTRODUCTION

A widely accepted view, from sociocultural perspectives, recognises that children actively co-construct meanings about themselves and their worlds through interactions with people, objects and places (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). Such co-constructions often involve mediating interactions with more capable others where a range of language forms are shared. These mediating interactions assist children in negotiating meanings. Symbol systems such as drawings act “as a cultural tool and mediating device” through which “complex ideas, emotions and experiences” can be explored and shared (Richards, 2017, p. 127). As children make meanings through their drawings, stories and other art forms, they are responding to their sociocultural worlds and co-constructing new meanings that are shared with others (Dewey, 1934/2005; Soto & Swadener, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). Children’s expression and communication through the arts unites “sense, need, impulse and actions” (Dewey, 1934/2005, p. 26) and provides them with a means of expanding understandings about everyday experience, such as building friendships (Thompson, 2003). Through the arts children can also express ideas and feelings about more disturbing experiences, such as natural disasters (Roje, 1995), terrorism and war (Orr, 2002; Pavlou, 2008). Artmaking helps some children to make sense of immigrant experiences (Hertting & Karlefors, 2013; McArdle & Spina, 2007; Richards, 2017) and homelessness (Joanou, 2017; Swadener, 2005). As such, drawing, and other art forms, provide “private and public spaces for imaginative and intellectual play” and are “authoring spaces for children's identities” (Wood & Hall, 2011, p. 267).

Art experiences are core human experiences that add depth and meaning to individual and collective lives (Dewey, 1934/2005). As such, art experiences matter in the lives of children – not just in terms of artworks and artistic motivations, but also in terms of how children experience such events and how these can shape their socioemotional development and wellbeing.

RESEARCHING YOUNG CHILDREN’S ART EXPERIENCES

In order to understand young children’s perspectives on their art experiences within authentic social and cultural contexts, research was undertaken with four young Australian children (Richards, 2012). A major aim of this research was to gain an understanding of these children’s art experiences from their perspectives, as they transitioned in time and experience between home, preschool and school contexts. As such, the overall research question was, ‘What is the nature of a child’s art experiences over time in their home, preschool and school?’

Research Processes

Following ethical approval, forty children were identified, who were in their last term at an early childhood centre. The children and their families were informed of the nature of the research and invited to indicate interest in participation. They were informed that four research participants would be given digital cameras with which to take photographs of their art experiences. These art experiences would be part of the children’s ordinary art activities in their home, early childhood and school settings. In my role as researcher I would visit their homes on a regular basis and each child would then show me their photographs and talk about them. Their photographs would be saved and their

discussions would be digitally recorded in audio form. This aspect of the research would take about ten months and I would also visit and observe the children at their early childhood centre and school.

Ten children and their families expressed interest in involvement and by arrangement I visited each child in their home. Factoring each child's and family's inclination to be involved, gender balance, geographical location, and schools' willingness to participate in the research in the following year (when potential participants started school), two girls and two boys, from three Caucasian families and one Chinese family, were invited to participate. These children were Lilly, Sophie, Jackson and Lee (pseudonyms), who were aged between four-years seven-months and five-years four-months at the start of the research. They lived in a small Australian city in two-parent families with one or two siblings (21 to 29 month age gap).

Research processes associated with narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and visual ethnography (Pink, 2013) were employed. In brief, through a narrative inquiry lens individuals are seen "as living storied lives on storied landscapes" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 24) and, as a research approach, experience is understood through sharing and re-sharing individuals' narratives of experience. It is argued that researchers working with participants become part of that story and develop reflexive relationships and the "person in context is of prime interest" rather than the "universal case" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 32)

Researching with young children through narrative inquiry facilitated collaborative ways of working with children as I listened for their stories of art experiences and retold these with them (Richards, 2018, in press). This also presented a dynamic approach that went beyond the children and their immediate communities as, in the spirit of narrative inquiry, the research story was ongoing and relived, shared and re-shared within the research community. For example, this article and the shared stories it may provoke, becomes part of the narrative inquiry.

While photographs have not traditionally been central to narrative inquiry, this research required research methods that made the children's art experiences visible and supported arts-based modes of communication. Photography can inform ethnographic research and ethnographic approaches can promote the production and interpretation of visual images (Pink, 2013), as photographs are a means of recording data and a medium through which new knowledge and critiques are shaped. Advances in visual technologies, such as digital photography, have unlocked new ways of conveying meaning in the construction of ethnographic descriptions, including research with children. Within my research the young participants created narratives with and around their photographs of art experiences.

These photographs, the associated discussions and contextual knowledge then helped shape understandings about the nature of the children's art experiences in their homes, early childhood and beginning school settings. Within a narrative inquiry framework analysis was not a discrete event that happened outside of the research processes, instead each interaction was a form of reflective practice. For to interact with a child, listen to their narratives of experience and view their photographs was to be conscious of his or her art experiences and this consciousness provoked analysis. As Barone (2007, p. 466) pointed out, "our aim as researcher-storytellers is not to seek certainty about

correct perspectives on educational phenomena but to raise significant questions about prevailing policy and practice that enrich an ongoing conversation”.

One of the challenging issues associated with data analysis and interpretation of children’s perspectives was that of being faithful to each child’s perspectives and experiences. To some extent this was achieved by selecting and describing those experiences, or series of events, that had pervading qualities that made them stand out from the rest. In the thesis resulting from this research the voices of each child, and his/her photographs were showcased in a series of dedicated chapters. This article takes a differing approach in that it takes a theme that emerged from the art experiences of one child, Lilly, and considers some of the ways in which she explored various female roles and identities through her drawings and associated discussion.

LILLY

Lilly, who was 4-years 7-months old at the start of the research, lived with her mother, father, and two-year-old sister Raewyn. The family had regular contact with grandparents and both parents were in paid employment. Lilly attended a community preschool on two and half days per week, and the following year she attended a private girls’ school.

Lilly’s participation in this research spanned about ten months. The first phase related to art experiences at home and preschool; the second to home and school experiences. Throughout the preschool and school terms, Lilly was visited several times over a two-week period, comprising one home visit and two to four preschool or school visits, where I observed and interacted with children and staff. She was also visited twice during summer holidays. During home-based visits we viewed her photographs and she talked about these. Her photographs were saved and conversations digitally recorded in audio format. Often during these visits, she drew additional drawings.

Over the course of the research she shared around eight hours of recorded discussions and one thousand photographs. Following my visits, and on many subsequent occasions, photographs, comments and interactions were reviewed in order to create research notes, which developed into complex and interconnected research narratives. As noted, the overall focus of the research was an investigation into the nature of children’s art experiences, from their perspectives, over time in their home, early childhood and beginning school setting. Out of this data, themes also emerged in terms of each child’s abiding interests and big ideas. In Lilly’s case, a dominant theme that she explored through her art was that of family relationships and female roles such as being a sister, mother or wife.

Fundamental to the early years learning framework of Australia “is a view of children’s lives as characterised by belonging, being and becoming” and as “children participate in everyday life, they develop interests and construct their own identities and understandings of the world” (Council of Australian Governments, 2009, p. 7). This article threads together a selection of Lilly’s photographs and narratives in order to illustrate how she used her drawings to explore and graphically narrate notions of belonging in a family, being a sister, daughter and schoolgirl and becoming a woman.

In the following discussion, a selection of Lilly’s comments and drawings are shared and all research data, including photographs, are presented with informed consent from Lilly

and her family. Pseudonyms are used for people and places. The photographs were taken by Lilly or as directed by her and while these pictures are not significantly altered some have been edited to exclude extraneous or identifying information.

LILLY'S ART EXPERIENCES

Drawing permeated many aspects of Lilly's daily habits and routines. She had many family interactions based around her art, and drawing in bed was part of her bedtime routines. Lilly's and her sister's art making activities and artworks were valued as part of family life and the girls were provided with basic art materials such as pens, pencils, scissors, and paper. They also had space to spread out and spiral-bound books of cartridge paper in which to draw. As such, art activities were an integral aspect of Lilly's family-based routines.

Lilly's favoured drawing as a play activity and usually drew with pens, lead pencils or fine felt-tip markers on paper or light card. While she often drew in one of her many spiral-bound drawings book, at other times she drew on found objects such as shopping lists, envelopes, card, scraps of paper, cardboard tubes, cereal boxes and the like. When drawing in her book, Lilly randomly selected pages and on many occasions drew several drawings on the same page, drew on both sides of her page and re-orientated pages to create a variety of base lines. She also revisited drawings to add details, additional features or shading. I was not present when Lilly made many of her drawings and as she drew so prolifically it was not plausible for her to photograph or fully discuss every drawing. However, within this visual ethnographic and narrative orientated research, Lilly's photographs and related narratives of experiences, provided insights over time into the connections between her thinking and her drawing actions.

A dominant theme that Lilly explored through her art was that of family relationships and, in particular, female roles such as being a sister, mother or wife. Actual family events also influenced her drawing topics. For example, when her father's cousin visited their home Lilly drew female cousins in some drawings. Lilly drew several fictional female characters included Dorothy, Glenda, Munchkins (Wizard of Oz characters), mermaids, princesses and witches.

LILLY'S DRAWING: EXPLORING FEMALE ROLES AND IDENTITIES

Most children, by the age of four, speak and behave "according to conventional images of gender" (Hoy & Margetts, 2013, p. 43) and Davies (1993) suggested that children were relatively powerless to resist the male-female binaries of gender identity or to negotiate their positions in relation to these. However, personal drawings enabled Lilly to explore some characteristics of femaleness, versions of femininity, and her sense of belonging within families. She prolifically drew images of females and families and delighted in sharing these drawings and narratives with me. This article provides a small selection of these drawings and her comments about them.

Family relationships and belonging in a family

Many of Lilly's drawings included two or more people as central figures. Often, when discussing her drawings, Lilly expanded on the relationship between the various

characters. While most of her drawings contained just female characters, occasionally a male character also featured. For example, she drew a family group with baby in a pram (Figure 1) and during her description of this drawing I got the impression that the subject-matter of this drawing was Lilly's mother with baby sister Raewyn, with Lilly and her step brother as older siblings. In this drawing the older siblings are obviously close in that their hands are touching.



Figure 1 Family with baby in pram

Thus, one reading of this drawing could be taken as Lilly exploring how people (and thus herself) belonged together in a blended family. Given the ages of the siblings, Lilly was a toddler when Raewyn was a baby, this drawing appeared to be a re-imagining of her personal history rather than a remembered event. Across a variety of her drawings Lilly also explored mother-baby bonds including compositions of a baby in a mother's arms, in a cradle, a pram or sitting on the floor with a family. Her interest in exploring family relationships, sisterhood and being female through drawings were so recurrent and complex that I regarded these as a category of 'big ideas' that she explored through art.



Figure 2 Sisters' drawing together; drawing of sisters

Being a sister

Being and having a sister were realities for Lilly who shared a bedroom, attended the same preschool and played with her younger sister. Their joint play episodes included art projects and their parents encouraged and valued their creative outputs. For example, displayed on the refrigerator was a drawing of families, which Lilly and two-year-old Raewyn had drawn (Figure 2, left).

Lilly had taken care to draw the patterns on her mother's dress, reportedly closely observing her mother's actual clothing and then replicating patterns in the drawing. While the sisters had distinct drawing styles (Raewyn's drawing is to the left), similarities, such as the star-like eyes, suggested that Lilly acted as the "more culturally knowledgeable" person (Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000, p. 2) in terms of visual and cultural conventions for representing femininity, such as exaggerated eyelashes.

A few months later at preschool, Lilly again explored themes of sisterhood. On this occasion, when a new boxed computer was delivered, the children imagined what was inside. Lilly drew a picture of two girls and declared, "I think there's a real little girl and her sister inside" (Figure 2, right). She enjoyed entertaining this fantasy and again signified femaleness with eyelashes, rosy cheeks and frilly dresses.

Lilly focused on sisterhood in many home-based drawings. For example, she described her series of drawings featuring two women with long dresses and crowns as the "Queen and the Queen's sister." She was captivated by 'The Wonderful Wizard of Oz' book and created numerous character drawings, especially Dorothy, Glenda and the Munchkins. Amongst her drawings she drew "Big sister Munchkin" and acknowledging her authorship explained, "I made her up." Thus, sisterhood appeared important to Lilly, in terms of her personal experiences, identity and sense of wellbeing and she carried this through to her drawings by providing her fictional characters with sisters.



Figure 3 Humpty Dumpty's wife; Little Mermaid and sister

Lilly extended her repertoire of female characters by re-storying traditional stories and rhymes. For example, instead of drawing Humpty Dumpty, she drew "Humpty Dumpty's wife" and herself as "Mrs Humpty Dumpty's friend" with both females sporting long eyelashes and blushed cheeks (Figure 3 left). Likewise, when her younger sister was given

a mermaid doll, Lilly drew “The Little Mermaid [and] a mermaid sister” (Figure 3 right). In this drawing, the older mermaid has a bikini top and exposed navel, features evident in the commercial toy, while the sister mermaid was drawn more child-like. Perhaps reflecting her identity as an older sister, Lilly often used visual strategies to signify age differences. She also extended Dorothy’s family (from the Wizard of Oz stories) to include other female members including an aunty and elderly mother.

When talking about her drawings Lilly expressed pleasure in providing drawn characters with family and friends. At preschool Lilly also used drawing to regulate her emotional wellbeing. For example, at her preschool each child had a learning portfolio, which was written by teachers and shared with parents. One teacher recorded the following: “Lilly was sad (cried) when mother left – “She didn’t say goodbye.” [She] painted what she was feeling and added [a] ‘sun’ to make herself feel happy again.” Playful drawings, such as these, provided Lilly with “opportunities to learn to deal with [her] feelings, to have empathy for others’ feelings, and to develop healthy emotional outlets” (Kwon & Yawkey, 2000, p. 12).

Clothing and dress-up

It was my observation that Lilly was not especially interested in her own clothing but she enjoyed drawing clothes and accessories, such as in Figure 4, where mother and daughters are shopping for clothing. Sociologists, Raley and Bianchi (2006 p. 409), suggest that “girls may be more likely to approach their mother to fill their needs (e.g., go shopping for clothes) when the activity dovetails with their perception of their mother’s rather than their father’s greater expertise and interests”. As such, Lilly’s drawing touched on both a potentially real episode and provided an example of stereotypical gender roles and relationships within consumer society.



Figure 4 Mother and daughters clothes shopping

In terms of finding visual information to inform her clothes drawings, in addition to media images, Lilly looked carefully at real clothing and book illustrations. Thus, the environment provided her with artistic provocations as she responded graphically to

visual and popular culture. Like other young artists, she frequently included details associated with “bodily adornment and beautification” (Ivashkevich, 2011, p. 25) and concepts of femininity and female-appropriate clothing were closely linked when she symbolically represented females.

Lilly’s repertoire of drawn fictional female characters included Dorothy, Glenda, Munchkins, mermaids, princesses and witches, and she had dress-up costumes she sometimes wore at home. During several of our earliest home-based interactions she wore a Snow White costume. As she drew pictures and made a paper crown it appeared as though ‘being’ a fictional female character while artmaking allowed her to transform herself and her drawn characters so that some of the commonplaceness of her life, such as having a sister, were bestowed onto her characters, and some of the fantastical qualities of the drawn characters (such as wearing a crown or elaborate dresses) were enjoyed by Lilly.



Figure 5 Dorothy and friends

Developing drawing competencies really mattered to Lilly and she often reworked her drawings and scrutinized book illustrations and animations, with the view of extending her own drawings. For example, as part of her bedtime routines, Lilly studied illustrations in her Wizard of Oz book and drew pictures of the characters (Figure 5). Lilly’s gender schema for representing female characters through elaborate clothing was again evident when she saw the character of Glenda in the DVD movie and commented that she was “more prettier” than in the book because she had a “long dress, black shoes and nice socks”. This visual awareness motivated her to modify existing drawings, tape paper bows to her slippers and create new images. She practised drawing shoes (Figure 5 right) and drew Dorothy with socks and shoes (Figure 5 bottom left). Providing for female characters by making them prettier, elaborately dressed and with companions blended traditional female roles associated with nurturing and more contemporary versions of femininity such as empowerment through beautification. Thus, Lilly’s drawing decisions hinted of her own beliefs about acceptable female traits and aligned with dominant images of girlhood available to her. Alongside this, Lilly exercised a degree of agency that enabled her to choose her drawing topics, she had good drawing competencies and family support that encouraged her exploration of ideas through drawing. Her exposure to new and relevant stimuli, in this case the movie images, also enhanced her “perceptive art experiences” and facilitated development of her “current interests, curiosity and inclinations” (Richards, 2018, p. 147) .

Becoming a woman



Figure 6 Dorothy as a girl, mother and old woman

Lilly created new roles and life histories for drawn characters. For example, she drew Dorothy as a girl (Figure 6 left), as a mother with baby (Figure 6 centre) and as an old woman (Figure 6 right). She recognised her invention and with regards to Dorothy as mother said, “I haven’t seen the movie of that one – I just made it up.” Lilly storied Dorothy as becoming a mother, rather than, for example, a business woman, artist or sportsperson. As will be shown, the progression from girlhood to motherhood was explored more fully in some of her other drawings and while motherhood does not exclude other roles, and Lilly’s mother was in paid employment, there was no indication in Lilly’s drawings of women taking on dual roles.



Figure 7 School girls; Pa with an apron

Being a schoolgirl

Lilly, at age 4 years 11 months, started at a private girls’ school. At the same time, her family moved to a new house. Although Lilly continued to draw at home her mother

noted she did not create “nearly as much as she did before she started school.” At school Lilly’s class had weekly art lessons but the content of these did not notably influence how or what she drew at home. However, being in a girls’ school extended her repertoire of female characters including schoolgirls wearing uniforms (Figure 7 left). She commented, “It’s a whole class but somebody is missing.” She hesitated, and as she apparently reconciled the idea of excluding classmates from her picture she re-storied: “They’re not my class – they’re a different school.” This propensity to care about her drawn characters’ well-being, such as avoiding exclusion, again suggested that through drawing Lilly gave story, voice and image to her beliefs and attitudes.

Lilly’s spontaneous drawings revealed distinctive drawing styles, including elongated figures that almost echoed Chagall-like compositions, as figures danced and floated across her pages. Her school-based drawings, such as the one in Figure 7 (right), were less flamboyant as she strove to meet the requirements of the set tasks, work within restrictive timeframes and gain approval from teachers and peers. This particular drawing episode, which I observed during a school visit, was in response to story about a grandfather. It caused Lilly some emotional discomfort when several girls laughed at her drawing, claiming she had drawn a dress on her grandfather. She thought the girls were “mean” and her Pa did wear an apron in his shop. It was possible that not only were the girls acting to silence Lilly’s deviation from accepted drawing schemas for males, but these private school pupils may have had little concept of an apron-wearing working male. In this respect, Lilly experienced a silencing of ways of knowing at an intersection of gender, her experiences of working roles and personal drawing styles. As this drawing activity was based around responding to a story, as part of a lesson that focused on shared reading and written language, the rich source of beliefs and attitudes shared through the drawings and associated discussion were invisible and unheard by the teacher. Nevertheless, incidents such as these could have provided fertile grounds upon which children were encouraged to understand diversity and the “complex nature of identity” (Cosier, 2011, p. 52) as expressed through their drawings, and thus teachers could build discussions with young children that may counter narrow male-female binaries of gender identities.



Figure 8 Drawing of Sophie’s family

Although Lilly had a history of experimenting with her drawing approaches, after a month at school, and incidents such as 'Pa with an apron' I observed her display heightened anxiety about sharing her drawings. For example, at home she drew a series of very small and detailed drawings of Sophie's family – Sophie being a classmate and another research participant. Lilly drew several pictures on the same page with the family members in domestic situations including watching television, sprawling on a couch, in a wheelchair and eating at a table. The family, which was drawn in the centre of the page, was no taller than five centimetres (Figure 8).

Lilly explained, "Well it's Sophie's mum and dad, Sophie and Charlotte and Greg."

"Did Sophie see the drawing?" I asked.

"No, she doesn't know."

"Should I show it to her when I visit her?"

"Ahh...don't tell her how I drew (sic) the hair 'cause I accidently drew girl hair – see everybody's got girl's hair." She pointed out the males on either end (Figure 8).

Therefore, while Lilly had developed an extensive repertoire of drawings, she struggled to work out how to represent males. Neither school nor home experiences had equipped her to tackle this drawing problem, and as she had experienced censor from classmates with regards to drawing men this may have influenced her cautious response to sharing her art.

Becoming a woman and mother

While drawings of fictional characters dominated Lilly's earlier drawings, once she attended school more drawings featured 'real' females. At school her teachers strove to promote positive female models through projects such as 'Women who most inspire us'. Although this theme provided some scope for investigating women in a variety of roles, without exception the girls in Lilly's class painted pictures of their mothers.



Figure 9 Love, marriage and pregnancy

At home, Lilly's spontaneous art continued to focus on traditional female roles, such as motherhood. Through numerous drawings she also explored notions of romantic love,

such as a drawing that featured a heterosexual couple kissing, celebrating with gifts and wine (Figure 9 left); a wedding day scene (Figure 9 centre) and a family that included a pregnant woman (Figure 9 right). Although aged just five, Lilly graphically explored notions of becoming a partner, wife and a mother.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The drawings and comments re-presented in this article are just snapshots of the many ways in which Lilly explored her sense of belonging in a family, being a girl and sister, and her sense of becoming a woman. Her drawings provided a means by which she explored gender identities as she moved in and out of ways of knowing, trying on various personas and testing out scripts based around female lives. Thus, her art experiences were empowering, usually safe and potentially interactive ways for her to explore and develop herself as a person. Yet her sociocultural environment, especially at school, did not always support her exploration of gender identities, especially if these deviated from clear male or female stereotypes.

While one case study cannot be generalised, Lilly's development of gender schema associated with being a caring female, was exercised through meeting the emotional needs of others, albeit her fictional characters. Therefore, children can exercise some agency through self-initiated art and, based on my interactions with Lilly, I came to believe that her gendered drawings were more than just unconscious responses to socially conditioned gendered identities and roles. Instead, through her art Lilly storied her characters in ways that met their supposed emotional needs and her own, as she also graphically and narratively "negotiated, tested, confirmed, rejected or qualified again and again" (Kraus, 2006, p. 109) her own sense of identity and belonging.

When Lilly started school at a girls' private school, being amongst a group of female peers and teachers appeared to support and extend her interest in themes associated with being female and these themes were often explored through art at home. These versions of becoming a woman and mother, as expressed through her drawings, were legitimate expressions of future orientated thinking and possible ways of becoming for this child.

Implications and recommendations

Lilly's spontaneously created drawings, such as those featured in this article, provide focal points for children and adults to discuss views and beliefs – recognizing the child as knowing and curious. Such discussions may generate possibilities for expanding on gender stereotypes, exploring prejudices and considering alternate futures. Interacting with children as they artistically express their views, concerns and interests provides opportunities for educators and parents to support young children's social and emotional growth.

In the spirit of narrative inquiry, where stories of experiences are shared and re-shared, Lilly's stories and images of experiences may provoke readers' empathetic engagement and connection with their own experiences. In making these connections educators may find places in which to co-construct understandings about personal and gender-identities with those children for whom they care. Through critically reflecting on Lilly's art experiences, teachers and parents may come to understand that a child's artistic

exploration of people and places of belonging, which may intersect with their developing gender schema, provides insights into understanding a child's sense of belonging, being and becoming (Australian Government DEEWR, 2009).

An initial set of challenges and implications is that of providing children with opportunities to spontaneously create art on topics of their choosing; to discuss their artworks with other people, and to be listened to by adults who are sensitive to a child's interests, concerns, inquiries, exploration of gender-identities and evolving sense of belonging, being and becoming. At home, Lilly had several good quality drawing books, easy access to drawings materials, and parents who valued, displayed and preserved her artworks. She also had family routines that including drawing and regular contact with caring adults who were genuinely interested in her artworks and opinions. She was not limited in her drawing topics or censored for their content. In order to replicate similar opportunistic conditions in educational settings there needs to be an alignment between the provision of art-based physical resources, positive attitudes towards children's art as a worthwhile endeavour, and sensitive, purposeful interactions between teachers and children and between children themselves. For example, in addition to ongoing access to their own drawing books and drawing equipment, children could be encouraged to engage in regular drawing session in which they draw topics of their choosing. Time needs to be structured in ways that facilitate children's unhurried sharing of drawings with other children, as well as with adults. It is my belief that teachers who sensitively interact with children who are engaged in self-initiated art experience are likely to gain rich insights into children's thoughts, feelings, interests and concerns.

Further to this, children in educational settings come from diverse backgrounds and experiences, and through encouraging children's spontaneous art and related talk between peers and between children and educators, teachers can expand on the children's genuine inquiries. Such discussions allow room for supporting children's genuine explorations of gender-identities as well as opportunities for adults to recognize silences that may exist in their classroom talk - such as discussion about same-sex parenting, alternative gender identities, and women in positions of power or men in traditionally feminised work roles. Also, educators should be aware of ways in which they limit children's explorations – such as discouraging images of power as expressed through children's action drawings or encouraging narrow versions of families. Thus, through critically engaging with children's genuine interests, including gender issues, teachers can not only support children's current understandings but also provide some alternative models and narratives of gender-identity, which may disrupt dominant or limiting discourses around gender, belonging and families.

In a related point, when teachers critically reflect on how children graphically represent and talk about gender identities, ethnic groups, class and age distinctions they will become more aware of children's beliefs and attitudes, and the big ideas that children explore through their art. Having access to children's interests and concerns is important in strengths-based curriculum planning. In addition, adults can be aware of the ways in which children's actions and interactions might promote discrimination, exclusion, or social injustice and work towards addressing such issues.

Lilly's drawings and narratives indicated that children do ponder about issues that adults are not always comfortable with, such as sexuality and procreation. Blaise (2013, p. 3) suggests that adults should bridge the "distance between the 'knowing' adult and

‘unknowing’ child” and for example, make “room to dialogue about children’s emerging understandings of gender and sexuality and how children themselves understand the sorts of advertising that generates debates around the sexualisation of children”. In my opinion, instead of labelling children drawings as cute or disturbing (depending on the level of discomfort they create for adults), children’s challenging drawings should provide starting points for discussions about emerging notions of sexuality, gender identities or other relevant issues. Such discussions may involve the child, his/her parent/s and educators. Admittedly, these can be very sensitive issues to address when responding honestly to children’s authentic interests and concerns. However a child’s drawings does provide common ground for discussion in which the child is positioned as knowledgeable. It is also important for children to voice their views and for educators to take care not to over analyse children’s drawings or aggressively interrogate the young artist.

Another challenge, prompted by Lilly’s graphic re-storying of traditional stories and rhymes, is consideration of the ways in which societies over time have represented girls, women, female partnerships, aging, child rearing and gender identities and how the home or educational setting promotes and constrains ways of knowing. As Lilly used her immediate environment to gather ideas and graphic information, we should be aware of the images of men, women and families that are displayed in our classroom, the books that we share, the stories that we retell and the cultural biases we perpetuate. Through co-constructing understandings with children based around their drawings, which also provide a variety of representations of gender identities, educators and parents can support and extend children’s developing sense of belonging in families and communities, being valued in the here and now, and becoming more fully active in society.

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Biography

Dr Rosemary Richards is a Senior Lecturer at Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology (New Zealand) in early childhood and adult education undergraduate and postgraduate programs and Programme Manager of Applied Professional Studies. As a teacher, artist and researcher she is especially passionate about supporting young children's arts experience and helping teachers to do likewise. Her research interests include narrative inquiry, art education pedagogical theory and knowledge, child-sensitive methodologies, children's perspectives, self-efficacy beliefs, ethnography, visual methodologies and International