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Exploring the place of Arts Based Approaches in Early Childhood Education Research

Editorial Essay

Peter Clough and Cathy Nutbrown

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Abstract

Defined broadly as the use of art-forms - music, drama, music, painting, storying and so on – to create privileged insight into educational policies and practices, Arts-Based Educational Research [ABER] techniques have started to have some, albeit limited, purchase on the mainstream of educational enquiry; there is less evidence, however, of their use in Early Childhood research. This paper critically outlines the chief characteristics of an ABER approach, its claim to legitimacy in the currency of qualitative research practice, and the issues which presently both drive and challenge it. An example from the authors' own work is given, and the paper concludes with a prospectus of critical issues, questions and exhortations.

Research and the Art of 'the possible'

Our purpose in framing this Special Issue is to draw attention to some of the uses of arts-based methods that are being made in the context of young children's lives. Whilst Arts-

Based Educational Research enjoys growing popularity – particularly in the US – the same, it seems, cannot be said in relation to Arts-Based *Early Childhood* Research. Our recent trawl across a wide range of publications in 2017-8 revealed only a smattering of studies which attached both descriptors *Arts Based Educational Research* (ABER) and *Early Childhood Education and Care* (ECEC)¹. It was for this reason – in an attempt to flush out the interest we believed was there! - that we proposed a Special Issue of JECR. The response generated, in addition to those papers featured here, accounts of some otherwise wonderful and innovative children’s art, dance, drama, music and storying projects in settings, of using and promoting the arts with young children, many of which will see publication in the *Journal of Early Childhood Research* in due course, but few used the arts as a *methodological approach* essential to their research methodologies. And whilst some used the arts – poetry, drawings, model making – as a means of generating data then used by researchers to promote (for example) children’s talk, few attached the descriptor *Arts-Based Research*. What this tells us about the use of ABER methods in the early childhood sector – or indeed about the readership and potential authorship of the journal – warrants further consideration, but we want to insist that there *is* a community of interest and activity at large, and we want to encourage and enable it to grow; in short, we want to advertise the peculiar power of ABER methods *at once* to reveal, illuminate, expand communicate young children lived educational, and societal, experiences.

In this introductory paper we present a brief introduction to ABER method/ology², and its claim to purchase on legitimate enquiry; we show briefly how ABER accords with recent, postmodernist scholarship in the qualitative humanist research paradigm; and we offer some modest examples of our own ABER. Above all, we hope that readers will be encouraged and enabled to realise the art of their own enquiries.

¹ We stress that our review was not comprehensive and did not allow for any wider variation in use of these search terms or any cognate alternatives; it is quite possible that other disciplines have drawn more fully on ABER in ECE.

² For fuller, systematic accounts and rich examples, we would urge readers to see Elliot Eisner’s scholarship of the theme: Eisner, E.W. (1991) *The enlightened eye: Qualitative inquiry and the enhancement of educational practice* New York: NY:Macmillan; Barone, T. and Eisner, E (2012) *Arts based research* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE]

i. ABER

“Not everything important is measurable, and not everything measurable is important.”
(Elliott W. Eisner)

Arts-Based Educational Research has developed out of a growing need to portray human experience in ways that do not seek to quantify, or generalise, or even ‘analyse’, and from a sense of the importance of retaining faithful portrayal, interpretation, and understanding of human experience. As Eliot Eisner (to whom many of us have served a sort of ‘apprenticeship’ of ideas about the arts in educational research) argued: not everything can or should be quantified. It is from this position that ABER has emerged, over the past 25 years, within a qualitative paradigm that resists the culture of positivism. ABER is growing internationally, for it offers the political motivation of making explicit and visible those aspects of life which often remain invisible, *making the familiar strange* (Stronach and Maclure, 1997 p.53), and brings into focus those often taken-for-granted parts of life. We suggest that Arts-Based Early Childhood Research is an area where growth is necessary in order to provide more of the intimate accounts of what is important to them. For in the case of young children understanding the ‘ordinary’ as well as the ‘extraordinary’ in their living and learning is crucial to understanding *them* as citizens and as learners.

No test, no observational schedule, no checklist, will adequately uncover the richness of children’s minds and hearts, but, we suggest, arts-based responses to critical research questions about childhood and children’s learning can take us nearer to a more meaningful portrayal of what it is to be a child and a young learner.

For Cahnmann-Taylor and Siegesmund (2018) Arts-Based Research:

‘when well done, communicates educational findings in new, impactful and more widely accessible ways. The arts have much more to offer the educational researcher as a means to make our thinking robust, fresher, and more public, rendering the richness and complexity of the observed world’ (p.10)

For some, ABER is a political agenda fuelled by a commitment to social justice issues, (see Tierney, 2010; Toynton, 2006) but there is a risk here that the arts become then a ‘means to

an end' simply another set of methods (Blumenfeld-Jones 2018) which can risk missing the possibilities of the *imagination*.

ii. What does ABER do?

We start from a view that traditional methods of social science cannot 'capture', or even sensitively treat of the delicacies, the subtleties and *interstitial* events of human experience; by contrast the art-form by its very nature can insinuate if not actually embody the liminality of that condition.

However, we believe it a mistake to create a ghetto identity for ABER, as though those who do it differ in kind significantly from other (so-called 'qualitative') researchers in ideology, in epistemology and so on. In fact, what they do is wholly identical at outset: what ABER *techniques* do - and have in common with any method of social science - is to create data which can be worked for an analysis. To be sure, by definition these data are created or revealed through *a particular form of aesthetic attending* which may not be as readily manageable as, say, survey data; but they are data nonetheless.

Now it is probable – likely, in fact – that the *occasion* of research-making with these techniques is somehow more sensuous, more *nervous*, for all concerned; that it is somehow transformative, for all that may be invisible. But: if it is *research* – and not play-production or painting or whatever – then we do it so that we can understand phenomena, so that inferences can be drawn and thus conclusions arrived at. We say *inferences can be drawn* – rather than *implications made* because the artist who sets out to teach radically diminishes the art; in short, work which is didactic ceases to be art. This may be a key defining characteristic of arts-based research: that it does not, in itself, draw or provide conclusions; these are the work of the reader or the viewer or listener, whilst the work of the artist-researcher is to dress intuitions with only vapid edges so that insight is embodied rather than in any way propositional.

ABER: the 'domain of the possible'

Obviously, received modes of enquiry in the social science – both 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' – are bounded by the concepts and functions of their respective epistemologies and ontologies; those concepts and functions are themselves products of philosophy and science respectively. In a critique of Deleuze and Guattari, Bogue (2007) shows their identification of 'the primary purpose of philosophy [as being] to invent *concepts*', and 'that of science to delineate *functions*', in sharp distinction, the purpose of art is 'to bring forth *percepts*, or sensorial aggregates' (p, ix, original italics). Thus, a piece of art

does not actualize the virtual event but incorporates or embodies it: it gives it a body, a life, a universe. ... These universes are neither virtual nor actual; they are possibles, the possible as aesthetic category." (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994, p.177)

In quite this way, we see the researcher who uses a form of art as a means of re-presenting social phenomena as *slipping off* – as far as is possible - the stuff of both philosophy and science and opening up vistas of possibility.

What *is* Arts Based Research in Early Childhood Enquiry?

Viewing the species *Homo sapiens* as it evolves and expresses a behaviour of art is a way of understanding ourselves and the modern *condition humaine*.

(Dissanayake 1990, xi)

Most young children readily paint, draw dance, move, create and respond to the arts. In one form or another the Arts are central to human life. In fact, Dissanayake (2001) suggests that infants are born with what she calls *aesthetic incunabula*, a 'swaddling' whereby the need to seek out the aesthetic is apparent from infancy. This is what Clough (2002) calls an 'aesthetic attending', the way in which, as a condition of being in the world, we attend - through the senses - to the 'objects' we encounter:

Aesthetic attending to something is not a special or a marginal case peculiar to (self-conscious) artists, but one which can be systematically developed...only because it is the very foundation of intelligence. (Clough, 2002, 85)

As current examples of developing arts based approaches in research (Henderson, 2019; Blaisdell, 2019; Latham, 2019, and Niland, 2019) show, text itself can be art, and other approaches using artistic medium may be usefully drawn into research practices and methods to create richer portrayal of human experience. For Henderson (2019), the emotional labour of early childhood educators is laid bare through the use of fictional devices to tell otherwise untellable stories. Blaisdell et al. (2019) offer a reflective account of their successes and dilemmas in their project to find ways of working with children's own creativity and play. They set out their struggle to balance an adult-researcher agenda with the open-ended methods they used, and in so doing show how an intergenerational approach to 'eliciting voice' with young children can promote a more inclusive experience for children and researchers. In a similar vein, Latham (2019) reports her attempt to '*understand what it is like for young children to be in the world*' whilst simultaneously searching for a way to '*reclaim a sense of place for the teacher/researcher and the children and to capture young children's profound wondering*'. Latham argues that looking back at a study can provide enhanced perspective and clarity to adults' roles in research practices. Niland et al. (2019) use arts-based research actively to involve young disabled children as participants in a study of their perspectives on inclusive education. The authors reflect on the question of how genuinely and *ethically* to listen to (that is, really to *hear*) children through aesthetic approaches, and of how artistic enquiry can meaningfully engage young children.

We have written earlier on the place of narrative and fictional devices to illuminate issues of childhood and learning from an historical perspective (Selbie and Clough 2005; Nutbrown and Clough, 2014). Others too have used the arts as means of data collection and though they tend not to claim these devices as Arts-based research *per se* (see for example Chesworth, 2016;2018; Deguara, 2018), they none the less offer more inclusive ways of 'voicing' young children's experiences with a cautious approach to adult imposed analysis that risk disregarding or distorting those very voices.

Consideration of the place of the Arts in early childhood education research raises a number of questions: What methods can be used in ABER? Could it be the case that ABER finds its best application in 'sensitive' issues? What can ABER do? Do you need to be an artist to do

ABER? Or can anyone use arts-based approaches? Can ABER be taught? Can/do you only do arts-focused research using ABER approaches? How does an art exhibition, a novel, drama or musical performance differ from an exhibition of ABER-generated art exhibition, a novel, drama or musical performance? This introduction, and the papers in this collection, draw on selected literature, and a number of examples, to offer some responses to these questions and in so doing demonstrate both the complexity of using arts approaches in a research project and offer a consideration of the place for *imagining* in Arts Based Early Childhood Research.

We turn next to an example of how narrative and fictional methods can be used in early childhood research, how lives are turned into text, and how imagining can suggest a truth.

Using Narrative and Fiction in Arts Based Early Childhood Research: a story

In the context of our earlier discussion, we want next to illustrate how narrative and fiction can be used in educational research (Clough 2002). To do this we draw on data and our own experiencing of a recent study³ involving families affected by imprisonment (Nutbrown et al., 2017).

Whilst working on a family literacy project in men's prisons, we each wrote and shared reflective research notes as soon as possible after a session in a prison. The reflection below was written by Cathy immediately after a family literacy event, providing a glimpse into that occasion.

CEN/Research Note: HMP [Anon] June 2015

It is the hottest day of the year. Walking across the yard to the Visits Hall the sun is already baking, and it's still just 8.15 am. [Colleagues/anon] have been setting up since 7.45 and the room already looks inviting. The large alphabet jigsaw is down the centre of the room, plain white T-shirts of various sizes, and baby vests with fabric paints are

³ Briefly, the project followed a pattern of work with groups of imprisoned fathers on aspects of young children's literacy, followed by a half-day's Workshop when their children visited with the mothers/carers, and the men led them through a series of shared literacy experiences. In collaboration with family workers from Pact [Prison Advice and Care Trust], we helped facilitate, and evaluate the project.

ready on a table with a note 'Write your name on a T-shirt, Daddy will help you'. Nursery rhymes are playing in a corner where the floor is covered in blankets, soft books and a set of puppets. There are biscuits with small icing pipers, templates of little books with felt tips and stickers ready for children and their fathers to write together, and leaflets of the 'Star Trail' ready for each family. The trail invites families to try all the activities on offer then win a prize, a certificate, and a present from daddy'. Activities include: Nursery Rhyme Time (where families share a number of rhymes together), design their own story book, play logo snap, read a book together, make up a story using the 'story bag', decorate biscuits with letters or children's names, draw on the chalk boards, design a T-shirt, do a part of the giant alphabet jigsaw, find 10 nursery rhyme characters hidden around the room. Along the way there is food too for those not observing Ramadan.

At 8.30 the men begin to arrive and sit or stand around the room, eyes fixed on the door through which their families will soon enter. Children and their mothers arrive in small groups and after a period of greeting and catching up, the men begin to take their children on the Star Trail. ...

...

Children laugh, enjoy getting messy with paint with their dads, one father lies on his back on the floor bouncing his 4 month old up and down to the rhythm of the rhymes playing on the CD player... I'm struck by the simply and natural intimacy of this image – wish I could take a photo.

...

One family settles on the floor, close together, while the father reads 'The Gruffalo' to his two children...

...

A little girl runs up to a prison officer to show him her newly designed T-shirt. Both smile...

Some other inmates come to open up the café – and I recognise one of the men - Asif was part of an earlier [anon] workshop. It's Ramadan, and he's fasting, but he's pleased to come and cook to offer another treat for the children and the men during the family

day...He told me how much he enjoyed being part of [anon] and how his daughter loved the book he gave her... ' She takes it to bed with her every night, and even the boy likes to read his too and he ain't that much bothered about reading'

...

For three hours, families engage in literacy activities, before certificates are presented by the Governor. Then goodbyes...

...

"I love you daddy' I hear as one four-year-old, holding her mother's hand, skips to the visitor exit. She's watched by her dad, who waves gently before leaving himself – through a different door.

The next pages in Cathy's note book contain another account, but in the form of a story that imaginatively follows the little girl, her mum and baby brother as they leave the prison at the end of the visit.

....

This is the full story

Outside, it was the brightest and warmest of June days. Mollie skipped along - ahead of her mum who was pushing Billy's pram. For all the world this was a very ordinary scene – but there was nothing ordinary about this family group.

Billy had met his dad for the first time today – he'd cried much of the time – uncertain, as 6 weeks old – of the smell, touch and sound of the man who held him. Sarah had given birth in the hospital a few hundred years from here – down the same street at the prison. She had her mum with her – while Mollie slept at a friend's house. Rob – so near but so far (the cruellest of cliché's) waited for a phone message to tell him all was well. He had a son.

Billy was still crying – the visit has unsettled him - Sarah was exhausted - but managed a smile for Mollie each time she glanced back to her mum. The 4-year-old

said nothing when her dad missed her birthday party – but today she climbed onto his lap and said, “I’m 4 now daddy – I had a party – I saved you some cake – but I ate it!”

Sarah had not slept a full night through for months – first kept awake with worry – now, woken every two hours by the urgent, demanding cries of a hungry infant....

Mollie skipped ahead until they reached the bus stop. ‘Look Mummy – It’s got a ‘m’ for Mollie on the front – and a ‘d’ for my daddy.’ Mollie was bouncing on the spot – her boundless energy was both delightful and wearying for her mother. Always on the go – Mollie could not stop moving – bouncy, bouncy, skip, skip, skip....

Sometimes, just now and then Sarah just wishes Mollie would just sit quietly – Just a moment’s quiet – but Mollie is a mover...

The bus comes, Mollie jumps on and skips to a seat right at the back of the bus. Sarah – struggles with the pram and the baby and slumps in the nearest seat she can find. It’s hard – it’s all so hard – and she is tired.

Sarah can hear Mollie talking to an older lady at the back of the bus. She’s showing off the T-shirt she made with her dad. “My Daddy helped me make it when we went to a party – and we had sandwiches, and biscuits and we made this T Shirt – -- [Sarah sat staring forward – watching the market stall holders packing up for the day - ‘Please don’t say ‘prison’; please don’t say he’s in prison...’ the words whispered in her head as she held her breath...]

...and we had a story and he cuddled Billy – he’s my baby brother... My Daddy can’t come home yet – he’s got to stay at work. But he’ll be home when I’m 5... or maybe 6. I’m 4 now!!!

“I understand...” the older lady replied

‘You have no idea’ – whispered the voice in Sarah’s head – you have no idea how alone I have been ever since that day in court when the judge announced ‘24 months in custody’ and I there I was – 6 months pregnant - Mollie holding my hand – and I

thought – what am I meant to do??? They took him to the cells – and I just sat there, his lawyer said something – I can remember and – no – you have no idea.

Peter read Cathy's reflective account and her story. What follows is part of their ensuing conversation, one of many between us that were recorded during that project; this habit of recording was one that enabled us to be free from taking notes, and to hold on to thoughts and ideas.

Peter:	So, the account in the prison – you saw all that - that happened. My account is pretty similar in many ways – different people but our two accounts pretty much fit together...
Cathy:	Yes – we were in different parts of the VH [Visits Hall] but our notes reflect the same event.
Peter:	But this next piece ...
Cathy:	mmm...?
Peter:	This is fiction, well obviously, isn't it? Where did this come from?
Cathy:	Well I found myself thinking about Mollie and her mum and how tired she looked – and how happy Mollie seemed. I kept wondering what happened. But more than that – I was wondering what it must <i>feel</i> like...
Peter:	To be Sarah - you mean - to...
Cathy:	To have all that going on – and to be so tired – and the thought of people knowing – to be stigmatised because your man is in prison. And then giving birth – and the weariness of everything ...
Peter:	But you said...

Cathy:	I know what you're going to say – I was struck – well we both were – about how when the women came into the visits hall, they were all smiling and seemed so calm and happy – Yes – and Sarah was too. She didn't show a hint of what I imagined – but a new born is hard enough – then the coping – alone and having your babe meet his dad for such a short time – and then...
Peter:	When they're back home again....
Cathy:	So I was just scribbling – musing really on what it might feel like.... I don't know if ... I know I could have asked if I could interview her - but it wasn't about that – it was about <i>me</i> ...me trying to feel how Sarah might be feeling.
Peter:	Interesting - I found myself thinking – not about Sarah's bloke but about [another father] who I'd been talking to - working with - and his family. I found myself well - musing on how it might have been when he went back to his wing y'know and how the rest of his day might have been/would've been/ seemed.

Peter had written this.

The heat as he walked back to B wing was in one sense unbearable but the outside air and the space and the sky was still welcome, though short-lived; he'd be inside soon enough; he and the other men couldn't make the walk back last more than a few minutes. He was on kitchen duty next and glad of that. Something to do. To stop him thinking about what he was missing. It was great to see them, but it killed him to see them go. All the lads were walking slowly – silently – not wanting to give any sign that they were weakened by the partings...though Abbo was giving it out 80 decibels and foul-mouthed as usual (his way of dealing with it?).

The kitchen was hot, sweaty work, but busy and loud, he wiped his forearm across his eyes occasionally - relieved that the sweat masked an occasional tear ...

That night – in his cell – he remembered reading with his boy – and the smile on his girlfriend’s face – and in the dark, lonely, angry, fearful, he said to himself over and over in the noise of his head: I’m never coming back – not ever’. He didn’t sleep.

Is there a place for imagining in Arts Based Early Childhood Research?

We are aware that we could stand accused in these accounts of going beyond the data, of ‘simply’ imagining. But what we want to say to this charge is that there is nothing in these two imaginings that has not happened *in some way* – to some imprisoned fathers and to families ‘on the outside’ whose lives and relationships are affected through parental imprisonment. As Henderson (2018) similarly does, our account above takes research data and weaves it into a narrative account; where it is both necessary and morally acceptable, imagination is used to fill in some gaps, but these imaginings too, have their beginnings in real life events (Clough, 2002; Sparkes, 2009; Henderson 2018) and similar accounts can be found in other publications (Nutbrown, 2011; Clandin et al., 2014).

In this sense we suggest that ABER which focusses on early childhood issues can open up new *modes* of understanding, and that to date, they are under-used in ECE research. We are not suggesting that arts based approaches and methodologies should replace other existing methods – they too, are important, in illuminating some difficult issues and in challenging policies and practices which are not conducive to early childhood education or to children’s well-being and learning. What we are suggesting here, is that Arts-based educational research indeed *has a place* in ECE which is currently under-occupied.

As there can be no standard primer for arts-based research, so too, there are no exemplars; they are both *in-the-making*. And to the end of helping modestly those movements, we finish our piece here with a number of observations on where and how arts-based methods of enquiry are most fruitfully made.

What arts-based educational research methods do and have in common with any method of social science, is to create data which can be worked for an analysis. To be sure, by definition these data are revealed through *a more explicitly aesthetic medium*, and as such may not be as readily manageable as those from the recorded interview, say, or the questionnaire return; but they are data no more nor less. And whilst arts-based methods themselves privilege a particular way to access *knowing*, these ways – and the knowledges they create - are not the privilege of an elite skilled in arcane practice. We watch television or read novels or look at paintings and we *know* what persuades us of their truth [and what doesn't].

Like any method, arts-based research techniques are found, or made, in the service of needs, so a given question in its particular context *may* call for an arts-based method; or it may not; or it may call for a number of approaches, one or some of which might draw on an art-form. The point is that at the outset we should not define ourselves primarily as arts-based researchers, and then look for a topic, but rather ask of a given situation *Can this be critically understood? How best are its meanings revealed?*

Arts-based methods need a careful justification... There remains the question of [academic] validation, particularly where a piece of arts-based enquiry is submitted for academic credit. The academic convention of citing previous research upon which any given study is based does not always work if those cited are themselves built, not on the rock of quasi-positivist certainty, but rather in the – if not rich and loamy clay – shifting sands of artistic possibility! Recent research accounts which we have seen – mostly in examination – are most successful when their positionality reflects a reading of postmodern thinkers such as Deleuze, Derrida, Foucault and others. [Of course, the very notion of 'justification' is itself highly suspect when enquiry is truly 'post-modernist'...] ... *and most particularly in terms of the form of art that they draw on*. Where an art-form is used, the criteria for the judgment of that form surely apply; a story must be a 'good' story, or sculpture, or collage, and so on.

Some topics lend themselves more readily to arts-based research. The maxim for adopting (and then adapting) any method for a study is surely that *as contexts define their topics, so the means of understanding them will vary according to purpose and audience*. Any

situation of events – actual or imagined – might attract arts-based methodologies, but most instances that we know of could be said to have some unresolved moral freight; they have their root in emotional conflicts of identity in moral and political spheres; they are often concerned with the locus and ab/use of power; they frequently seek to establish a previously diminished or suppressed voice; and they often arise from a lack of respect for young children’s rights.

And, of course, the art-based account can provide the screen of anonymity where a particular individual identity must not be compromised. Clough (op.cit.), for example, creates fictionalised accounts based on data from a number of empirical research projects that featured people whose phenomenal identities could not be revealed, but whose stories offered rich and pathetic comment on the policies and practices that made reflexively context of their lives. Thus:

Arts-Based Research methods provide a potent means of realising ‘Voice’; these methods may allow a creative access to a voice previously suppressed or ‘inaudible’ by virtue of impairment, say, or immaturity or political will (though there will always remain the question of how authentic that voice is, or to what extent it is mediated – and hence infected – by another who frames it)

Arts-Based enquiry shares a common ground with young children’ experiences and this is, perhaps, a final reason why ABER might be particularly addressed to childhood phenomena; it is the ground they share in the creation of things beyond the phenomenal; they have an affinity in the common ground of their essential creativity and capacity for *play*; their common *suspension of disbelief* entailed in creative action; and their dependence on the effect and power of metaphor. The ‘saying that something is another thing’ which is the heart of metaphorical creation is common to children’s play - the easy assumption that children can make that ‘this is a bus’, ‘this is my crown’ and so on – and to creative art - that one thing stands for another and, ultimately, that one thing *becomes* another.

In the end...

. . . our primary obligation is always to the people we study, not to our project or to a larger discipline. The lives and stories that we hear and study, are given to us under a promise, that promise being that we protect those who have shared them with us.

(Denzin, 1989, p. 83)

Actually, it doesn't really matter whether researchers self-consciously locate their work in the stable, and its pedigrees, of Arts-Based Educational Research as such, for in any event that badge; the truth – the 'plausibility, purchase and power' (Clough, 2018) – of a study is not achieved because it references this-that-and-the-other research/er (though the academy still requires this to justify its approval). And a claim that ABER privileges an 'alternative' and access to experience, a different, privileged epistemology must be treated warily (if not dismissed altogether); to claim for one moment that ABER differs in root from any other form of research not only does it no favours politically, but quite misses the point that it makes: ABER only 'works' if it reaches the senses, and it does this in common means with any other enquiry, from lab-bench through RCT, by empirical – and that is to say sensible - means.

In any event, ABER should be examined by the same form of questions that we should address to any enquiry: In the context of a particular study: Could this study/out/come have been achieved in any other way/method? Is the object created/constituted in a quite particular way that is recognisable to practice? And in terms of ABER generally: what doesn't/can't it do? And so: What *difference* does ABER make?

And this is no less the case for Arts-Based Early Childhood Research, where young research participants or co-researchers, give their thoughts, their play, their images, their drawings, their dance, their clay models, their stories willingly to adult researchers. We need, as an ethic of research guardianship to ask these same questions: do the arts help here? Does my report faithfully portray the young children and their voices; what are its limitations?; what are its major strengths?; What does it contribute?; How does Arts-based Early Childhood Research make a difference to children's lives, their learning and their rights? For after all, a key aim of ECE research is to make a positive difference to children's lives and learning - to

bring about change and to challenge those things that the evidence (from all forms of critical research) tells us are not helpful. So, this aim towards personal transformation remains critical – and whilst research may change the lives of researchers, and do ‘good’ (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2018) in the lives of young children – there remains the challenge of persuading some in the Academy, and in government, that ABER has a place.

And, as Eisner observed:

“... the greatest source of security concerning arts based research is not in tight rationales articulated by academics who have a vested interest in their use, but exemplary arts based work which is difficult to dislike. In other words, deeds, not words, may be in the end the most persuasive source of support and the source that yields the highest levels of credibility.” (Eisner, E. 2005 p. 6)

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