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4 A Child's Constructed Life: Primary School Children's Perspectives on Aesthetic Self- Development Through Structural Transition in Scottish Education

HILLARIE JEAN HIGGINS

Abstract

In the midst of the Scottish government's implementation of a new National Curriculum in public education, my research project has attempted to create a flexible and interactive space in which primary school children explored and shared their life knowledge and construction(s) of self through reflective narratives and various art mediums in a classroom environment. Utilizing an educational model derived from the work of John Dewey, my research focuses on working with these children as co-researchers as we explore the results of processing, expressing and sharing life stories through art mediums in the creative spaces brought about by a time of structural transition, and in what ways narrative and art expression serve as communicative forms which can enable children to re/create and assign meaning to the concept of self and personal identities.

'The self is not something ready-made, but something in continuous formation through choice of action.'

John Dewey

'...men and women develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality but as a reality in the process of transformation.'

Paolo Freire

Keywords: Aesthetic expression; narrative expression; therapeutic life writing; public education.

Introduction

It is a time of educational transition in Great Britain. In November 2004, the Scottish Executive formally introduced Curriculum for Excellence – a redesign of the National Curriculum, which states that the goals of education are to help children become successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective social contributors. Currently, Scottish primary schools are in the midst of implementing draft outcomes of this redesign initiative, which is also meant to reduce overcrowding in the curriculum and to provide each child with more choices and space in which to learn. This is a time of uncertainty, expectations and change – characteristics that can also often define the period of time preceding the teenage years, the intermediary space between childhood and adulthood. A child's ability to manoeuvre through their formative years is strongly dependent on their ability to explore and understand their own conceptions of self, and Curriculum for Excellence, in theory, promotes educational programs that support the development of individual thinkers who are aware and involved in the construction of both themselves and the world in which they perceive themselves to be.

Meanwhile, on November 11, 2008, England and Wales passed legislation requiring children's perspectives to be considered in, if not incorporated into, educational planning. As an addition to the Education Act of 2002, schools are, at a minimum, legally required to seek out children's perspectives regarding both policy and practice, which can range from uniform selection to the delivery of the curriculum, and general issues of equality and sustainability. This empowers children to be active and vocal members of their educational context, explicitly supporting the idea that children are capable of making important decisions and contributing to the world around them. The continuation of this kind of legislation has the potential to not only change the way in which schools regard children, but the ways in which children regard themselves as students and social members.

Research Process

Thus, for me this has been an exciting time in which to conduct research in British primary schools. I was invited to work with a Primary 5 classroom, a class of 9/10-year old children in a progressive primary school in Edinburgh that regards this structural, curricular and even cultural shift to be an ideal time to encourage creative planning and innovative learning. I developed and implemented a curriculum that is aligned with the draft outcomes areas of Expressive Arts and Health and Well-being, which identifies children as being artists and authors of their own lives, providing them a space in which they process, express and share their life realities and narratives through various art

mediums – creating what I term ‘aesthetic life narratives’. These children are also co-researchers in this project where data is based upon the perspectives and descriptions of both the researcher *and* the participants – in a sense, the children and myself both play the role of ‘participant’ and ‘researcher’. I am interested in children’s perspectives of owning the role of artist and researcher in a public school context, and the ways in which this process has affected their chosen life narratives, the emotions they assign to them, and the way the expression and sharing of these stories possibly affect their construction of self. In agreement with Heidegger’s view that language and understanding are inseparable structural aspects of being human, Gadamer (1960/1998) states: ‘Language is the universal medium in which understanding occurs. Understanding occurs in interpreting’ (p.389). We understand, we find meaning, through the way we interpret and then communicate our worlds. Therefore, as I’m utilising a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology, the data is meant to be a co-creation, a layered product of negotiation between the interpretations of both myself and the children. I approach this research under the belief that, if we define and describe ourselves through the ways in which we express and communicate our interpretations of ourselves, our roles and the world around us, then combining the ‘horizons’ of the children with those of my own – what we as interpreters expect to see, what we allow ourselves to see, and our interpretation of our range of vision – will bring about a more complete and organic description and analysis of the research process.

Curriculum Project: Child as Artist, Life as Art

Narrative is a form of language that can enable one to re/create, and assign meaning to the concept of self and personal identities. For children, the use of narrative can assist with life transitions and with personal issues, traumas and crises that, for a child especially, may seem overwhelming and cause isolation, if not shared. At the same time, sharing their life experiences may cause a child to feel exposed or unveiled. Therefore, through the exploration and use of aesthetic mediums, children can create a layer between themselves and the explicit telling of their story. A child can communicate their realities while assuming the identity of ‘artist,’ and use their memories, personal experiences and life stories as material for their creation of an aesthetic self. In this way, a child also has access to a limitless vocabulary and a bottomless container for the associative emotions that may not otherwise fit into other realms and would, thus, become repressed rather than expressed. Furthermore, through adopting an external viewpoint to an internal product, a child can then assume ownership and the power of interpretation over the stories and materials that compose their life, causing an altered perception of their idealization of self in relation to their subjective experiences. This can also allow them to assume a

new viewpoint on the emotions, experiences and stories that compose them, as well as their multiple identities in relation to these worlds, bringing about greater self-understanding.

At an early age, children are naturally inclined to attach narratives to the things that surround them through symbolization and through their connection to external objects (Burton, 2000, p.336). They create stories to accompany and drive their daily activities and play, and they also use them to explain events and everyday occurrences. Their stories and the way they communicate them develop and change as their relationship with their context changes and continues. In *Art as Expression*, Dewey (1934) argues that, through experience, a child alters their interaction with the world around them, attaching meaning and consequences to particular actions and particular uses of language. If the children are introduced to art as a language, they have also discovered another way to express the stories and realities they may have not yet found words to express. However, this artwork may also bring about additional knowledge that was not intended or realized before its production. For not all of what is created is consciously controlled, as art allows the subconscious, and the stories and emotions it holds, to speak. Our art takes on its own life. Yet, it is limited by the life we can imagine. Life itself can only reach the bounds of our imagination and senses – what we cannot envision in our wildest dreams will rarely come to find us on its own. The limit of our horizons expands as far as we are able to allow ourselves to see. Once we see our limits, we can push beyond or maintain our borders. Therefore, a child's relationship with their artwork has the potential to bring about validation, reflection and/or further discovery. They can acquire meaning through not only their process of expression, but also the viewing of their product.

Personal experiences and memories compose the narratives we construct about our context(s), our overall reality and ourselves. As such, narratives are directly attached to emotions – how we feel about an event or story affects how the story is presented. The emotions direct our interpretation and its construction; however, we form and shape its structure as its creator. Thus, through the art of storytelling, a child can develop an ownership over their architecture of meaning, as well as authorship of their expression. Blumenthal (1999) argues that Self is not the cumulative total of our multiple identities or the static product of our interactions, but, rather, a responsive and mobile creation that remains affected by past Selves and the identities these concepts once embodied. This original creation is a physical composition of existing internal realities and characters we have played and continue to play, positioned externally for further reflection and analysis. A narrative reflects its author, while an author reflects upon their narrative. The relationship between child artist as audience, and audience as artist, can provide further insights into their role within, and outside, of the realities they communicate. Every communicative exchange may have the potential to trigger or manifest various

self-conceptions and, thus, significantly alter a child's overall sense of self. The relationship between an artist and their artwork is one characterized by assurance and dissatisfaction – both being temporal and malleable states. Similarly, the emotions we attach to our stories may not fit into our ideal narrative construction, but they too can possibly be altered through, not only time, but their communication and evaluation. Therefore, in order to develop a collaborative connection between their emotions and realities, it is important that children are aware of the meaning they ascribe to and/or extract from their life experiences. For our experiences shape our idealizations of self and the ways in which our conception of self is felt, presented and communicated. Every experience contributes to the next, but we are not helpless to the pattern created. If a child learns to consciously process internal worlds, the possibilities for their future can be potentially transformed.

Through my initial round of individual interviews, the majority of children claimed that they had never been encouraged to express their life stories and the emotions they assign to these – as they termed it, 'getting it out'. They quickly adopted the idea behind emotional literacy and life storytelling, and became rather passionate about it, as if stumbling upon a great discovery. Some of the children I worked with already engaged in a great deal of self-reflection; they processed and assigned narratives – comprised of personal meaning and emotions – to particularly traumatic life stories, but did not share their analyses with anyone else. An alarming number of these children, when asked why they had not shared these stories before, responded 'no one asked'. They found it therapeutic to share their stories, and the meanings they have allocated to them, with others and had simply not been given a space in which to communicate them. Other children found that communicating and expressing their 'sad' stories through art was helpful, but they were quite adverse to verbally talking about it – rather, they wanted the art to tell their story, to speak *for* them.

One child asked if he could express something that was not 'exactly true'. I responded that it was his story, and only he could feel if it was true or not, since our emotions are felt through the filter of meaning we use to define them, and our definitions are relative and metaphorical creations. This naturally brings up the question of what is 'fiction' and what is 'fact' within a child's telling of their life stories. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) contemplate this distinction while researching narrative inquiry, and quote Blaise (1993), who argues, 'Everyone's fiction is almost completely autobiographical. What makes it fiction, usually, is its degree of disguise' (p.180). In a sense, every artistic creation is a product of our experiences and context. It contains fragments of memories and transforms them, reorders them to form something aesthetically 'new', which cannot be judged by the absolute terms of external measurements. To create an aesthetic life narrative does not represent life, but presents life as experienced and interpreted. As Bruner (1984) states, 'A life as lived is what actually happens. A life as experienced consists of the images,

feelings, sentiments, desires, thoughts and meanings known to the person whose life it is' (p.7).

Expressing and sharing life stories at an early age can be integral to the healthy emotional development of a multifaceted sense of self and, through the arts, a child can effectively access and share their experiences in a way that can provide them with anonymity and, to some extent, safety and a connected disassociation. This form of communication can be regarded as education of life, or, as Dewey (1897) argued, life as education. A curriculum incorporating aesthetic life narratives is not likely to change a child's context, but it can facilitate a child's conscious reflection concerning personal roles, capabilities and desires. Children can see that most art can be revised, as can most lives. 'What we write is always tentative, always open to revision' (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p.17). Revising an aesthetic narrative creates another power: the power to change our consciousness to hope and to reconstruct our perspectives. Today children not only bring the experiences of their own lives into classrooms, but, through technology and media, they also have access to the experiences of millions of people, in addition to their own, which can bring about detachment from the emotions of reality. By encouraging children to assume such narrative control over the moulding and composition of events, characters and metaphorical representations, a small sense of control over their life can be emphasized or even uncovered. It can serve as a beginning.

My qualitative research endeavour has required an artistic and open-ended approach where themes and meaning emerge from the data as it develops. Therefore, combining my subjective vision with those of the children permits the research to reach limits of more distance and depth than could be accessible by the perspective of myself as an individual researcher. While an artist arranges and orders the materials that are to compose her artwork, she is aware that these materials will be transformed through the artistic process. Likewise, as Dewey notes, a similar transformation is simultaneously taking place on the inside – with "inner" materials, images, observations, memories and emotions,' creating two separate and yet intrinsically connected operations that produce a 'truly expressive act' (p.74). 'As the painter places pigment upon the canvas, or imagines it placed there, his ideas and feeling are also ordered. As the writer composes in his medium of words what he wants to say, his idea takes on for himself perceptible form (Dewey, 1934, p.75). An artist may not be conscious of the forms she creates and, thus, art expression can establish a route of discovery and realizations of self. Similarly, I've found that the research process can embody that of an artist, constructing and composing itself as it proceeds.

Conclusion

Each person's past, present and future is a story, a narrative, that we tell to ourselves before going to sleep, while we are acting, reacting, speaking, thinking in certain ways and doing particular things in our life, and, most importantly, it tangles itself in our dreams, fantasies and goals. It becomes the map of existential identity, or, rather, survival – of where we have been, are now standing and where we can go. It is a map of reasons and directions. Our personal life narratives have been influenced by our class, race, gender, sexuality, and also by the cultural stories that have accompanied each identity we may explicitly or silently embody. Through recollection and re-evaluation of various versions of the past, we can reconfigure our role in the present. The importance of encouraging children to communicate their stories is to help children induce and maintain a healthful emotional, sexual, mental and physical development of body and self through narrative construction at an early age. A child must first negotiate their feelings and memories, make sense of them, and then develop a personal coherence and language with which to speak. They must construct a structure of meaning in a context of chaos, in order to create a narrative and, thus, a layered sense of control over their own existence. It is a story of survival, a battle fought to achieve unity – physically, mentally and emotionally. For our 'personal stories are not merely a way of telling someone (or oneself) about one's life; they are the means by which identities may be fashioned' (Rosenwald and Ochberg, 1992, p.1). Through art mediums, a child can stop to speak, share and connect with self and others in a way that may create a transformative experience for both artist and audience. If life is education, then education should incorporate a child's life and introduce new ways in which they may use their own experiences to both learn and teach. Likewise, in my own research, I have attempted to work with and engage the knowledge of children to create an organic product that communicates a shared experience as it was felt by all of us involved, as artists and researchers. While I intended to facilitate a curriculum to assist children through times of transition, I have found that my own perspectives are being broadened and altered by the process and the children themselves, in the journey from where I started to an end that I have yet to reach.

Meantime, the artist works to create an audience to which he does communicate.
In the end, works of art are the only media of complete and unhindered communication between man and man that can occur in a world full of gulfs and walls that limit community of experience. (Dewey, 1935, p.105)

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