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Awakening the “Sleeping Giant”?: The arts in the lives of Australian families

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Abstract

In 2001 a nation wide study (Costantoura, 2001) raised a number of questions in relation to the arts and Australian families. This study used group interviews and surveys to question people aged between 18 and 60 about their participation in the arts. Results from this study suggested that the arts add ‘an important dimension’ to family life; however, the ways this occurs and the nature of family participation in the arts were not made clear. Significantly, this study did not include the perceptions of young people under the age of 18. Here we report on one aspect of a complementary research project that sought to provide more information concerning the ways in which Australian families participate in the arts and to identify the meaning, purpose, and value of the arts for children (ages five to fifteen) in Australian school and community settings. Specifically, we focus on the ways in which children describe their engagement with the arts in family settings using the voices of young people as the primary source of data.

Introduction

There is increasing recognition amongst policy makers and political scientists that the arts contribute significantly to the health, wealth, tolerance and civic governance of society through the generation of social capital (Bolton, in Rogers, 1997, 64; Putnum, 2000). Social capital outcomes are achieved through the arts in such areas as education, criminal reform, therapy, youth at risk, community healing, and job training. Researchers in the field of subjective well-being (Happiness) assert that the arts are crucial in the maintenance of mental health and well-being (Argyle, 1996; Csikszentmihalyi, 1992) with subsequent implications for the ways in which individuals operate in, and contribute to, society.

Despite this emphasis on the positive benefits of the arts to individual and community well-being, there has been little understanding of the ways in which Australians engage with and value the arts. In an effort to redress this situation the Australia Council commissioned a report *Australians and the Arts* (Costantoura, 2001) seeking the views of adult Australians (fifteen years and older) concerning three key questions:

- how do Australians view the arts now?;
- how could they be influenced to have a more positive view of the arts in the future?; and
- what actions would the arts sector need to take to bring about any positive change?

The view of the arts that emerged from this study is a disturbing one. Key findings of the report suggest that whilst the arts are recognized as of social value ‘the benefits are not enjoyed or recognized equally by all Australians’ (Costantoura, 2000, 18) with a substantial proportion of the population described as a “sleeping giant” in relation to the arts (Costantoura, 2000, 20). This situation is attributed to a range of factors including the view that

...some members of the public hold out-of-date perceptions of what constitute ‘the arts’ and what the arts can mean to them personally and nationally. On the other hand, some people in the arts sector apparently hold out-of-date perceptions of who constitutes the Australian public, what motivates them and how to deal with them (Costantoura, 2001, vii).

Whilst this disjunction between perceptions may be attributed to a range of factors, a key aspect of the problem rests in the ways in which individuals and organizations define the arts. As Costantoura found (2001, 96), whilst ‘...the more traditional arts are firmly a part of the current definition’ (opera, ballet, art galleries, theatre and orchestras) many respondents in the study did not view activities such as reading or watching movies as participation in the arts. In defining and explaining the arts the study found that four main categories of answers emerged:

- **A broad range of activities** including any “creative” subject;
- **A simple, narrow definition** focusing on the “traditional arts”;
- **The higher arts** including those receiving government support;
- **The visual arts**, primarily painting (Costantoura, 2001, 89).

Costantoura suggests that Australians view the arts in two broad categories, ‘Big A’ versus ‘little a’ arts. In the former category are contained those ‘traditional arts’ normally practiced as part of the Western Classical tradition (opera, ballet, symphony orchestras) whilst the latter includes practices such as ‘popular rock or jazz music’ or ‘painting and play-acting done by small children’ (2001, 99). A recommendation emerging from the report is the encouragement of Australians to view the arts more broadly, to recognize the ‘little a’ arts as a component of arts activity.

In relation to families Costantoura asserts that ‘Parents participating in this study were, on average, less likely than non-parents to feel the arts have a high value’ (Costantoura, 2001, 147). He attributes this to the existence of ‘two different mindsets’ in relation to parents’ views of the arts, specifically that ‘...some people’s enjoyment of the arts is diminished by the practical, logistical issues that go with having children, others see that the arts add a dimension to their lives which enables them to enjoy their relationships with their families even more’ (Costantoura, 2001, 148). In further discussion Costantoura suggests that:

A supportive family that encourages children to be involved in the arts and finds ways to help them do this outside of school is more likely to have a positive effect on the attitude that a person has towards the arts than whether they enjoyed the way the arts were taught at school (2001, 129).

The study report raises a number of questions in relation to the arts and Australian families. Whilst it is suggested that the arts add ‘an important dimension’ to family life, the ways this occurs and the nature of family participation in the arts is unclear.

Respondents in the study identify 'Supporting family and friends' as an indication of arts participation, however, the data suggest that such support is largely in relation to audience participation:

Of the 45% of people who supported their family and friends in some way in the past two weeks, the most common type of involvement appears to relate to literature and drama, with 14% of people specifically referring to this...about one in ten supported someone in a musical pursuit (12%) and roughly the same proportion gave support in the visual arts (10%). Craft, dancing and other types of involvement were reported by only 4% or fewer people (Costantoura, 2001, 122).

In order to understand how the arts can add 'an important dimension' to the lives of Australian families, more information is needed concerning the ways in which Australian families participate in the arts. This paper reports on one aspect of a complementary research project that seeks to identify the meaning, purpose, and value of the arts for children (ages five to fifteen) in Australian school and community settings, and explores children's descriptions of their engagement with the arts in school and community settings ([Note 1](#)). Specifically, this paper focuses on the ways in which children describe their engagement with the arts in family settings.

Methodological Issues

The commissioned study *Australians and the Arts* (Costantoura, 2001) involved the following research strategies: discussion groups conducted in three states (NSW, Queensland and Victoria); two national telephone surveys each administered to 1200 individuals (a preliminary survey and an extended 30 minute questionnaire); and consultations with community members and those working in the arts sector throughout the country. The decision to limit the study to those aged fifteen and over was based on the view that '...some of the questions being addressed were considered too complex to expect reasonable answers beneath this age...' with the assumption that '...the analysis of younger people is, in part, achieved by examining the attitudes among parents of young children and teenagers' (Costantoura, 2000, 371). This view of the capacity of children to contribute meaningfully to discussions of issues that impinge directly on their lives has been challenged by studies that have sought to interrogate children's experiences and perspectives (Eder & Corsaro, 1999). We suggest that the issue is less one of capacity to deal with complex issues and more one of developing a methodology that is sensitive to and values children's voices.

The omission of children's voices from the commissioned study holds a number of implications. First, children's views on the arts are ignored through the assumption that they hold and mirror the views held by their parents. Increasingly researchers recognize that children are '...a group apart (largely from adults) with their own cultural lenses and so deserving of attention in their own right' (Matthews, Limb & Taylor, 1998, 311). Second, developments in the sociology of childhood highlight the ways in which children are not only attendant to the cultural practices of others (adults) but also active as cultural producers (Corsaro, 2000; James & Prout, 1997; James, Jenks & Prout, 1998). Third, the omission of children's voices discourages them from taking authority in the ways in which they engage with the arts and use the arts in meaningful ways in their lives. We are reminded that 'A society that avoids knowing about its children has already made an ominous decision about its priorities' (Graue & Walsh, 1998, xviii).

Consequently the aims of the project reported in this paper were both discipline-oriented and methodological. We sought not only to explore the meaning, value, and purpose of the arts in Australian children's lives, including their descriptions of participation, but also to develop research methods and techniques sensitive to children's ways of communicating and constructing meaning.

Methodological Approach

The research approach was designed to explore children's perspectives and provide opportunities for the co-construction of meaning. Special consideration was given to the most appropriate and sensitive ways of generating data with this group of participants and of acknowledging their expertise and unique perspectives on the subject of inquiry, the arts. Our design sought to build on children's knowledge and experience, and to value their engagement as co-researchers in exploring the research questions. Through the lens of narrative inquiry we sought to access children's stories concerning their engagement with the arts (Barone, 2001; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, 79).

In order to access children's perspectives of the arts in their lives the research is being conducted over two phases. In phase one (2002) the research has focused on children in school settings across Australia whilst phase two focuses on children in community arts settings (2003). This dual focus not only provides opportunity to explore children's perceptions of the arts in their lives, it also allows for an exploration of children's views of the arts in schools, and examines the meaning and value of the arts in the lives of those children who elect to participate in the arts beyond the school environment.

Participants

In year one some 330 children aged between five and fifteen years from across all states and territories in Australia (8) have participated in the project. In year two approximately 240 aged between five and fifteen years from across all states and territories in Australia (8) shall participate in the project. The data presented in this paper is drawn from phase one of the project. Participants in this phase were recruited through a two-stage procedure. Each state and territory department of education was asked to nominate four schools: two metropolitan, one regional and one isolated, including two primary and two secondary schools. The schools were subsequently approached and asked to nominate two children from each year group (preparatory – years 6/7; years 7/8 – year 10). We acknowledge that this procedure may have resulted in system organizations selecting the 'best' in relation to the arts. Informal discussion with schools and teachers involved in the project suggests that this was not uniformly the case. Schools advised us that children were selected on the basis of their capacity to contribute to discussion, not necessarily their level of engagement with the arts.

Methods and Techniques

To accommodate the aims of the research project we developed an iterative, multi-dimensional design that enabled us to work closely with children in a collaborative co-construction of the meaning, value and purpose of the arts in their lives. Consequently data generation strategies included:

1. small group open-ended ethnographic interviews (Fontana & Frey, 2000);

2. photo generation techniques in which children were asked to photograph the arts. This strategy involved children as co-researchers as they recorded the ways the arts occurred in their school;
3. artefact elicitation techniques to facilitate individual discussion with young children aged five to eight years;
4. photo elicitation techniques to facilitate discussion in paired interviews with children aged eight to fifteen years (Harper, 2000).

Procedures

In each school site the research was conducted over one day. In primary schools, the day commenced with a small group open-ended interview conducted with middle – upper primary children (6 – 8 children) for approximately one hour. The interview explored children’s definitions of the arts and sought descriptions of arts experiences that were meaningful in their lives in school, family and community contexts. Children were encouraged to discuss the ways in which the arts contributed to their lives, and to speculate on the ways in which they would engage with the arts as they progressed through and beyond schooling. At the conclusion of the interview children were taught how to use a digital camera and then asked to work in pairs in the school over the recess – lunch period to take photographs of the arts in their school. Children were encouraged to take a range of photographs but were instructed to ‘edit’ their findings to eight photographs that best represented the arts.

During the recess-lunch period children from preparatory to grade two/three classes participated in a small group open-ended interview for approximately forty-five minutes. Over the course of the interview children were engaged in discussion of the arts in their lives and asked to draw a picture of themselves ‘doing’ the arts. These pictures became the focus of individual discussions that explored the ways in which they participated in the arts and the meaning and value of the arts in their lives.

In the final session of the school day children from the middle-upper primary group returned in the research pairs to participate in a thirty-minute pair interview. The eight photographs were loaded onto a laptop computer and saved with a title given by the children. Each photo then formed the basis for a discussion that explored the reasons for taking the photo, what it told about the arts, and the meaning of the photograph to the children. This research procedure was employed in secondary schools with the omission of the preparatory to grade two/three session.

All interviews were video-taped, transcribed, and progressively analyzed. This analysis has involved two processes: 1. the identification of themes in children’s accounts of their participation in arts experience and their attributions of meaning and value in these experiences (thematic analysis); and 2. the re-presentation of children’s stories (narrative analysis, Barone, 2001) to illuminate understanding of children’s perceptions of the function and value of the arts in their lives, and their beliefs concerning their future engagement with the arts. The methodological approach has generated rich data concerning children’s perceptions of the arts in their lives as the emphasis on co-construction has provided opportunity for the researchers and children to explore issues at length and in depth.

In the following section of the paper we shall focus on the presentation of children’s

descriptions of their engagement with the arts in family settings. The analysis process for this paper has focused on the identification of themes arising from the children's narratives. These themes are specifically related to issues of family and the arts.

Awakening the “Sleeping Giant”?

Children describe the arts in multiple ways and hold ‘open categories’ of definition for what constitutes the arts ([Note 2](#)). Not only do they perceive the arts in ‘Big A’ (opera, classical music, ballet, drama) and ‘little a’ (popular music, films and television) categories, they also view activities not normally associated with the arts as examples of arts practice. For example, a common theme in many conversations was the identification of “nature” as an art.

FIGURE 1 - Natural Art (upper primary pair)



FIGURE 2 – Cloud Art (upper primary pair)



Through discussion children also suggested that activities such as sport, cooking, building, gardening, and home decoration could be classified as the arts. In the following discussion with an upper primary group the children describe the ways in which nature and sport can be viewed as the arts:

Conversation

Mitchell: Nature is there because we have kind of put it there. We have planted it and stuff and it has grown up and we can shape it.

Researcher: So it is something we have done. Okay, it is something we like doing; it is constructive; it is something we have made...

Hugh: I think that what Robert means as sport being an art is because soccer – my example is soccer because I play soccer – and it is sort of like the way we do it. You have to think of different ways to create a barrier to stop the other team coming through and you are creating something.

Researcher: So it is creative. You create something. It is thinking; it is creating; it is making something together, or by yourself?

Robert: You have to be smart to play sport. It is not – like say you have brilliant skills – you can run past everyone in soccer – that is not playing soccer. Soccer is using your head.

Researcher: Absolutely. So is the arts about being smart and about thinking?

Robert: Abstract art – I don't think you have to think if it is abstract or if you had a pen and paper and you scribbled – that is sort of abstract art.

Researcher: But is that art?

Hugh: You could create something out of scribble like sometimes I like drawing a piece of scribble on paper and then turning it into something like an animal or a tree.

Researcher: Okay, so just a scribble is not art but what you turn it into is art – is that what you are saying?

Hugh: Yes, it is what you turn it into (upper primary group)

FIGURE 3 – Sport Art (Secondary pair)



FIGURE 4 – Slam-dunk (Upper primary pair)



The distinguishing feature of discussions such as the above is a view of a common process across those activities defined as the arts. Specifically, this involves processes of: reflective thinking; problem-solving; skill development; applying a learnt skill in new and unique ways; practicing; and hard work. With this definition nearly anything that is “done”, done well, and involves some sort of planning, can be the arts.

Children also emphasize the role of the arts as a means of expressing and communicating thoughts and feelings. For example:

- ‘an expression of someone’s ideas and thoughts – their perceptions’ (Simon)
- ‘art...It is a communication device’ (Tamsin)
- ‘art symbolizes your feelings’ (Katie)
- ‘...the way of being able to express yourself and taking an idea and letting it stretch into something that may be different ...’ (Jessica)

The notion of the arts as a means to retreat or escape from reality is also a feature of children’s definitions and descriptions:

- ‘..it is a world that they have in their mind’ (Max)
- ‘the arts are a way to escape the reality of the world...the way to escape to a totally different world’ (Katie)
- I do that but not only does it give me a sense of achievement but it also (gives) a sense of relief. If I feel like drawing it is because I know that I need to draw. I need to get something out of me. Something inside of me is telling me to do it. There is some emotion there or feeling there (Michaela)

Others emphasize the ‘feeling’ of engagement with the arts:

- The arts are like...when you work really hard for something and finally achieve it (Michael)
- ‘...nearly every morning my Dad and me and my little brother we go surfing and that is all sort of flowing and it feels like art’ (Alex)
- ‘When you are doing art it is like talking to someone who won’t criticize and won’t say nasty things back if you tell them. It is just like a thing that is there – like a teddy bear that makes you feel really special and I like all the arts because they just make me feel like there is something in me that I can do and do it really well’ (Jessica)

FIGURE 5 – Flowtion – the feeling of art (secondary group)



In many discussions children emphasize the all-pervasive nature of the arts in the world, suggesting that the arts are embedded in everything:

- ‘everything has a component of art in it... You cannot build a building without art’ (Paula)
- ‘...everything you do, it is like the whole world is a piece of art. There are patterns everywhere and everything happens for a reason, and it is all part of art’ (Katie)

Overall, there is an emerging view in of the arts as integral to children’s lives:

Conversation

Karly: (the arts) It is very important.

Researcher: Is it important to you or is it important to everyone?

Karly: I think it is important to everyone. Like if I get really sad about something and I moan about it and then I make a joke about it and just start laughing over everything. I try and get a good way out of it.

Marilen: It gives you a sense of being – being able to express yourself. You can talk to yourself and it gives you a sense of being. You are not just some ordinary person who does regular things in the world today.

Karly: And all the feeling that you are going through, such as anger and stuff you can act it out and then sit really quietly and then go and do something normal (secondary group)

The arts in Australian families

For the children in this study the arts constitute an open category of experience that plays an important role in their lives. This is also evident in children’s descriptions of the ways in which the arts are practiced in their families. Children view a range of activities that do not fit traditional categories of the arts as examples of arts practice in their families. For example in the following conversations with separate groups, hairdressing, interior design, brick-laying, welding, carpentry, and sign-writing are put forward as examples of arts practice in these children’s families:

Conversation One

Ashley: My mum had a really tricky decision when she was in England because all my family, except for me, come from England and she had to choose between becoming an interior decorator or a hairdresser and my grandpa said she would make more money being a hairdresser so she is a hairdresser and now she really regrets it.

Researcher: Is it artistic being a hairdresser?

Ashley: Yes, like Jessica said before – the way you have your hair done is art. People with really whacky hair is art because of just the way they do it. My grandpa was a brick layer.

Researcher: Is that art?

Ashley: Yes because you have got to have talent. Not everyone can make a house.

Researcher: And I suppose it is the way you do it, isn't it?

Ashley: Yes. He was also a cabinet maker and he is making our cabinets for our new house in Wendara and I have got a cousin, he is studying woodwork and I have got Michael, the biggest cousin, he is in TAFE and he is studying welding and I think that is an art because he made a plant stand and that was really arty. It was all metal and swirls and stuff.

Researcher: But is it the welding that is art or is it what you do with the welding?

Ashley: It is what you do with the welding.

Researcher: Would that be the same with hair and everything? Do you think a cabinet-maker could make a cabinet that was not art?

Ashley: No. Well he could – he could just make a plain old cabinet with a normal door or he could make a really nice cabinet with a really nice finish and that would be art (upper primary group)

Conversation Two

Louie: ...my Dad is making a door.

Researcher: Okay so he is making this door and is his door different to other doors? Is it going to be special?

Louie: It is a door for our dog.

Researcher: Okay so it is a dog door. Is he being an artist when he does that?

Louie: Yes, because he is decorating it (upper primary group)

Conversation

Helen: My Dad is a crash repairer and he repairs cars and he paints them and sometimes on the bonnets he just does pictures and stuff and my Mum and Dad are pretty good drawers and Mum sometimes does sign-writing.

Researcher: Now there is one we haven't had.

Helen: And she just does like - for the kids clubs sometimes, she organizes the crafts and that sort of stuff (secondary group)

The following excerpts highlight the ways in which children's perceptions of what and who is an artist do not necessarily cohere with those of adults. Importantly, children do not require the practice of the arts as a profession to determine the identification of an individual as an artist:

Conversation One

Steven: In my family I have got five people - me, my brother and sister and my Mum and Dad and my favorite arts is visual arts because I like drawing and at home I do heaps of pictures but some of them get chucked out. My uncle does little cartoons and pictures and my great grandfather was an artist and we have heaps of pictures around the house...My uncle does really good cartoons in newspapers and always makes things...and my mum doesn't really do anything. She doesn't really do much art but sometimes my brother, Brad, asks her to draw things because she is good at copying. She is not good at art but she is really good at copying things.

Researcher: Is copying art?

Steven: Not really but sometimes she just copies ideas from things and makes them grow bigger and draws them. She doesn't think she is artistic but she is (upper primary group)

Conversation Two

Lillia: My sister, Shane, she is really into art and crafts and we have craft days so we might go to Spotlight. Like I bought a wooden frame and I painted it but we could paint it or put gems on it for something different and Shane really gets into that. My mum used to do a craft class and she is really good at drawing so if she has a picture in front of her and you give her a pencil and a sheet of paper she will look at it and draw it and when you look at her drawing it is exactly the same picture only in a larger form. I think that Shane might get her love of drawing and craft from mum. And my best friend's mum, she bought wooden things and varnished them and she has a talent for drawing flowers and painting them and they were really good.

Researcher: So she is an artist that you know? Would you call her an artist?

Lillia: A floral artist and she is really good at shading (upper primary group)

FIGURE 6 – Craft art (upper primary pair)



Conversation Three

Katie: My mum doesn't really do much. When she was younger she liked doing singing and stuff and I think that is where I got it from. My dad likes doing woodwork and he makes lots of bowls and he wants to start selling them. My sister is really good at visual arts and she has a way of doing it and it looks good. She doesn't think she is good but she is very good. Art is what you make it – what you want it to be (secondary group)

Conversation Four

Jessica: My mum does psychology and I think that is an art because she has got to think what other people are thinking and I think that this is an art form. She reads really thick text-books and she has to know all about what is in these and she has to pass all these tests and that and I think she is really good. I think that is an art form because to be able to do something like that and then be able to use it in a job so that you can help other people – I think that is art because you can use it and make use of it all the time. She uses it for her job and she uses it in every day use. My brother is also a really good artist. I find he is very good at his art. He might not draw things as well as he can do other things – like he does his colors really well – he makes up heaps of games and they are really good ideas and while he doesn't write them down on a sheet of paper or draw them, he is still really good at the ideas themselves (upper primary group)

Conversation Five

Tammy: My Mum sells makeup and she does makeup on other people.

Researcher: So do you see that as being an artist when she does that?

Tammy: Yes, I think so.

Petra: They are called makeup artists.

Researcher: They are too.

Petra: They change people's faces.

Tristan: Can a surgeon be an artist - like a plastic surgeon?

Researcher: A plastic surgeon.

Shaun: I think they could be (secondary group)

Many of the children's descriptions of arts practice in their families revolve around participation as a 'maker' in the arts rather than as an audience-member.

Conversation One

Jessica: I listen to my CDs at home and my tapes and I try singing with them as well and then sometimes I make up my own songs and then at Christmas time I sometimes get my whole family together and have a concert with all the songs I have been practicing.

Researcher: So do you play an instrument while you are doing it?

Jessica: Sometimes I play the piano.

Researcher: OK, right so you play the piano as well.

Jessica: I have just learned it from my brother's musical book. I don't have lessons (upper primary group)

Conversation Two

Researcher: Now we have someone whose Mum paints and we have two Dads who play in bands or play guitar - any others? What happens in your family, Ryan?

Ryan: I have a little triangle and my Mum has a big guitar.

Researcher: Your Mum plays guitar as well? Does she play by herself or in a band?

Ryan: She plays by herself.

Researcher: Do you sing along with her?

Ryan: No, I play the triangle.

Researcher: Fantastic. So you play the triangle along with her. Do you like doing that?

Ryan: And my sister has maracas and my brother has got some little cymbals.

Researcher: So it sounds as though you make music of your own with your Mum.

Ryan: Yes (early childhood group)

Conversation Three

Petra: At home – well I am the oldest of five children so I make up little things. Last year we had a music phase and I made up all these dances for my little sisters and brothers and then we invited the neighbors over and Grandma and Grandpa and had this performance and stuff like that and Mum plays the guitar and the bass guitar.

Shaun: And she is a good singer.

Petra: And my sister plays instruments and stuff and I play the clarinet. We did four songs. The first one was like a Bardot movement dance and the next one was an opera and the next one was when we were all on instruments and the last one was a rap song.

Researcher: Great. And do you enjoy doing that sort of thing?

Petra: Yes, we do little plays and ballets and we have heaps of family photos (secondary group)

FIGURE 7 – Music (secondary pair)



Participation as an audience member is a feature of some children's descriptions of arts practice in their families.

Conversation One

Researcher: ...Do you go to galleries?

Sophie: Yes.

Researcher: How often do you go to the gallery?

Sophie: I go there every Saturday afternoon.

Researcher: Do you, Sophie? What do you do in the gallery?

Sophie: I like it there. There are bright pictures that other people have done.

Researcher: So do you go with anyone in your family?

Sophie: I go with my grandma.

Researcher: Your grandma sounds special. So you go and look at all the paintings. Is it just you and your grandma?

Sophie: Sometimes my sister comes but usually it is just me and my grandma.

Researcher: Your sister doesn't like going as much as you. So when you go to the gallery, do you have favourite paintings that you go to look at?

Sophie: Not really because I like them all (early childhood group)

However, the overwhelming emphasis in children's descriptions of the arts, whether in schools or families, is on the *practice* of the arts. This is powerfully illustrated in the following conversation in which children debate whether viewing the arts (the specific example is watching videos) is an example of participating in the arts:

Conversation Two

Researcher: Tell us about the home movie theatre. What sort of things happen there?

Troy: First we had to change our big garage and we took everything out and then started putting the new door that is like in the house because you used to have to go outside the house and then into it so we had to block off the old door and put a new door in our house and it's got soundproofing because our Dad has to have it as loud as he can and there is a projector and surround sound and all that sort of stuff and it took about four months to get it all done and new carpet for it...

Researcher: So it is like a little cinema?

Troy: Yes

Researcher: What sort of things do you show there? It sounds great!

Troy: We get DVDs from the internet. My Dad knows all these Amazon people and everything so he orders DVDs from there and most of them are from the US and England. Some of them have come – we get them before they come out in cinemas here and most of them are pretty good. Some – my Mum and my Dad like better but they usually watch them Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays.

Researcher: Fantastic! So hang on now – I want to go back to something here because it is really interesting...we have been talking a bit about the audience and we have all agreed that it is an art to make a film. When you go and sit and watch these films, are you doing the arts?

Troy: Not really.

Cassie: Just viewing the arts.

Researcher: What is the effect of viewing the arts? Why do people view the arts?

Cassie: They get excited and they...

Reece: ...and entertained

Jenna: It's not a thing like "let's go and watch the arts". You don't really know if you are watching the arts and that makes you part of the arts but it has not really occurred to you that you are.

Researcher: OK, it makes you part of it but not really – you are not really an artist?

Jenna: No because you are watching videos and everyone watches videos (upper primary group)

The *practice* of the arts is not necessarily realized through engagement in traditional arts practices. For example, in the following excerpt a view of 'arts practice' as an attitude ([Note 3](#)), a 'way of seeing' the world is put forward:

Conversation

Ellen: My Mum makes web pages and she just grabs little bits of real life and takes photos of them and she has a camera where you can put it as a desktop and it is attached to the computer and so she just takes pictures of the texture and that...and my Step-Dad is a computer technician and my brother is also a designer and my sister – she just draws.

Researcher: Do you like doing that design stuff?

Ellen: Yes.

Researcher: How do you get your ideas when you want to design something?

Ellen: We just get our ideas from everyday life. Our family doesn't see a tree as just a tree but we see it for the texture of what it is – like every leaf has a texture and then Mum will take a photo and then she puts it through Photoshop.

Researcher: That is right, you were saying that. So are you saying to me that your family – it is the way you see things that makes you the artist, is it?

Ellen: Yes.

Researcher: So in other words I might see this as not the arts but if you looked at it another way then it might be the arts.

Ellen: Yes.

Researcher: So do you think that someone tries to be an artist or do you think they – that is just how you see the world.

Ellen: Well my Mum decided to become a web-page designer – it was her choice and the way she saw the world –

Bree: Everybody can do arts – it is just the way they think (upper primary group)

FIGURE 8 – Traditional art (upper primary pair)



Concluding Thoughts

Beyond the division of 'Big A' arts and 'little a' arts, children participating in this study view the arts broadly and include in their definitions a range of activities that are not traditionally associated with arts practice. For these children it is not 'what' you do that defines the arts, it is the 'way' that you do it, and the ways in which you 'see the world'. As Ellen puts it 'We just get our ideas from everyday life. Our family doesn't see a tree as just a tree but we see it for the texture of what it is'.

The arts sector in Australian is described as being plagued by a range of problems including an aging consumer base, uncertain future revenues and questions concerning the level of public support for arts activities (Costantoura, 2001, 3). The goal and remedy it is suggested is ‘ - to encourage more Australians to see the arts as part of their daily lives and for them to understand and enjoy the arts more’ (Costantoura, 2001, 3). The findings emerging from our research project suggest that Australian children *do* see the arts as part of their daily lives, and that they understand and enjoy their participation in these activities. The difference appears to lie in the ways in which the arts are defined by (rather than for) these children, and the nature of their participation in arts activities. We suggest that the challenge for the arts community in awakening the “sleeping giant” may rest in creating meaningful links between children’s and family’s definitions and practices in the arts, and those promoted by the arts community. Rather than identifying ‘entry points’ to the arts (Costantoura, 2001, 5) we suggest that the challenge is to create ‘connecting points’ between the arts practices of Australians’ daily lives and those of the arts community. In this way, the arts practices of Australian children and their families may be seen to inform, and in turn, be informed by ‘Big A’ and ‘little a’ arts practices.

I think the arts is a thing that you have to make in your own world and do it in your own way. Art is a place you can go but I suppose you can't go deeper unless you do what you haven't done before. I tried bull riding and it is one of the best things I have done in my life and rugby – that is great. I haven't tried bungee jumping and I reckon if I tried that it would be great. *They* also change people - almost like an artist (Patrick, grade 7).

Notes

[1.](#) The project *Australian children and the arts: Meaning, value and participation* (2002 – 2003) is funded by the Australian Research Council under the Linkages scheme in partnership with the Australia Council for the Arts.

[2.](#) This use of open categories of arts definitions may be linked to Dickie’s (1974) institutional theory of art.

[3.](#) This may be linked to Bullough’s notion of a ‘disinterested’ stance when engaged in aesthetic inquiry.

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