"AN ANGEL'S JUST APPEARED AND MARY LOOKS KIND OF WORRIED":

CHILDREN'S INTERPRETATIONS OF CHRISTIAN ARTWORKS

A thesis submitted in total fulfilment of the requirements of
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This thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma. No parts of this thesis have been submitted towards the award of any other degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution. No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of the thesis. All research procedures reported in the thesis received the approval of the Australian Catholic University Human Research Ethics Committee.
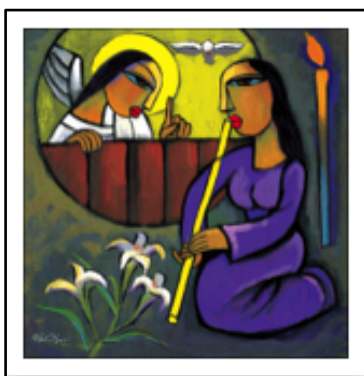
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ABSTRACT

Encounters with Christian visual artworks offer viewers opportunities to articulate religious understanding through interpreting representations of Christian scripture, beliefs and practice (Jensen, 2011; Ledbetter, 2001; McCarthy, 2010). To date, however, visual artworks are a largely unexplored resource in Australian Catholic primary school Religious Education, with research into children's interpretation of visual art being primarily limited to aesthetic dimensions of understanding. This thesis, which arises from experience as a Catholic primary school educator, takes an interdisciplinary approach to exploring children's interpretations of Christian artworks. It seeks to develop a more diverse knowledge of children's understanding of Christian artworks.

The study responds to two current concerns within the Australian Catholic education sector. One issue is the need to enhance students' visual interpretation skills in response to the increasing role of images in society (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2013). The other concern is the need for effective strategies and resources to address falling levels of student religious literacy (Bishops of NSW and the ACT, 2007).

The study investigates 13 children's interpretations of a range of artworks depicting the biblical narrative of the Annunciation to Mary (Luke 1:26-38). The study is set in a Catholic primary school with participants ranging from six to eleven years of age. The Interpretivist framing of the study takes into account the particular religious perspective of the Catholic school setting, and the individual nature of children's interpretations of visual artworks.

The findings of the study show that children make sense of visual artworks through a range of cognitive, affective and sensory interactions. Their interpretations chiefly focus on the intelligibility of an artwork's subject matter, where they generally endeavour to integrate pictorial elements into a cohesive narrative to explain an artwork. In addition, children often spontaneously

embodied the emotions and interactions between figures depicted in artworks as part of their interpretations.

The findings bring to light a fruitful correspondence between children's characteristic aesthetic attention to an artwork's subject matter, and the symbolism or iconography of Christian artworks. As children encounter Christian artworks they draw on traditional iconographic features such as symbolic colours, gestures, poses and settings that imbue these works with layers of meaning (Apostolos-Cappadona, 1995; Brown, 2008; McCarthy, 2011; Ratzinger, 2005). The participants' engagement with various aspects of Christian iconography throughout their interpretations of these artworks provides valuable insight into children's understanding of Christian scripture, beliefs and traditions.

The study raises implications for the use of Christian artworks in primary school settings. These works are shown to be meaningful and developmentally appropriate resources for children, which support holistic and challenging learning. Encounters with Christian artworks offer effective interdisciplinary learning opportunities including the support of multimodal literacy, visual arts appreciation skills, and knowledge about Christian scriptures, teachings and traditions. Overall, the findings of this study provide valuable background for Catholic educators and offer several areas for further inquiry.

Fra Angelico, *Annunciation* (1433-34)

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

This research arises from practical experience as a primary school educator in the Australian Catholic sector. It engages with a concern that emerges from within this particular educational setting, and is responsive to current issues affecting this domain.

Research purpose

The purpose of this research is to explore the forms of knowledge or understanding that Catholic primary school children demonstrate through their interpretations of Christian visual artworks. These works are a largely untapped resource in the primary school setting despite the literature revealing that artworks have been fundamental resources in the religious education of Christian followers for much of Church history (Benedict XVI, 2009; Ledbetter, 2001; McCarthy, 2010). An exploration of the potential of Christian artworks to support children's understanding of Christian scriptures, teachings and traditions is both timely and constructive. It responds to a need to explore further resources to support the development of children's knowledge of Catholic beliefs (Bishops of NSW and the ACT, 2007), as well as the need to expand the use of visual modes of communication across all curriculum areas (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2013).

Study setting

This study is set within the field of Australian Catholic primary school education. The Catholic school system is the main educational undertaking of the Australian Catholic Church, endeavouring to support families and parishes in their "educational, evangelical and catechetical mission, as well as to help the wider community in its educational and civic service" (Bishops of NSW and the ACT, 2007, p. 10).

Catholic schools exercise their responsibility to support the mission of the

wider Catholic Church through the delivery of a Religious Education curriculum, which aims to develop students' knowledge of the scriptures, teachings and traditions of the Catholic faith (Catholic Education, Diocese of Parramatta, 1999). The Religious Education curriculum emulates other learning areas through an equivalent academic focus and pedagogic rigour, since Catholic schools, whilst contributing to the ecclesial mission of the Church, are principally an educational body (Ryan, 2014).

Personal experience as an educator in Catholic schools has indicated the potential of Christian artworks to support children's articulation of insights into Christian scripture and tradition. Most research into children's understanding of art has however focused on aesthetic or cognitive dimensions of understanding (Arizpe & Styles, 2003). There is need for an interdisciplinary exploration, which is open to religious knowledge and other dimensions of children's understanding of Christian artworks.

Current issues in Australian Catholic education

In addition to exploring a gap in research knowledge, this study is a timely response to two current issues in the Catholic education sector:

i.   One issue facing Catholic schools in the domain of Religious Education is the need to explore further resources to enhance student knowledge of Catholic beliefs (Bishops of NSW and the ACT, 2007). The Catholic Church recognises that social and demographic changes within Australian society over recent decades have meant that students enrolling in Catholic schools have increasingly diverse religious and cultural backgrounds (Liddy, 2007; Ryan, 2014). Many children entering Catholic schools have little familiarity with Christian scriptures, teachings, history and traditions (Grajczonek & Chambers, 2014). Concerns about a decline in Catholic students' religious literacy, or their familiarity with relevant religious experience and language, have prompted Church leaders to call for schools to review Religious Education methodologies and resources (Bishops of NSW and the ACT, 2007).

ii.   The other current issue in the Catholic education sector is the imperative to develop student's ability to interpret images in the light of the increasing role of visual communication in contemporary society (Australian Curriculum, Assessment

and Reporting Authority, 2013). The expanding role of visual modes of communication in society needs to be acknowledged in schools by broadening the concept of literacy, and adapting pedagogy accordingly (Alter, 2009; O'Rourke, 2005). A multimodal approach to literacy will assist students to communicate more effectively in the contemporary world (O'Rourke, 2005; Williams, 2007). If Catholic religious education is to keep pace with pedagogical developments in other areas and equip students with effective religious literacy skills, it must place increased emphasis on visual modes of communication.

1.2 Research issue

The main issue prompting this study is a gap in knowledge regarding how children make sense of Christian artworks. Research with an interest in aesthetic understanding indicates that children engage purposefully with artworks to construct meaningful interpretations (Cannon, 2005; Freeman & Parsons, 2001; Housen, 2007). An interdisciplinary approach however is needed from within the context of Christian education, to explore additional dimensions of children's interpretations of Christian artworks. These artworks, which overtly reference Christian themes and stories, are not readily incorporated in Australian Catholic primary school Religious Education, and whilst personal experience indicates the potential of Christian artworks to support children's religious literacy, further empirical knowledge is essential.

Research question

Children have an innate need to make sense of the world around them (Frei, 1999). This natural impulse is facilitated by opportunities for sensory, affective and intellectual engagement with the environment (Whitfield, 2009). The way in which children make sense of Christian visual artworks is explored in this study. The question that focuses the data generation is: *What understandings do children demonstrate through encounters with Christian art?* This question implicitly accepts that children are capable of meaningful and diverse knowledge about the Christian art they encounter. The exploratory nature of the question leaves open the possibility of apprehending a variety of areas of understanding or knowledge.

Existing research

The process of visual meaning making or interpreting images is a dynamic and complex activity that varies according to context and purpose (Cochrane, 2014; Frei, 1999). Previous studies demonstrate that interpreting visual artworks is a process that involves a developmental sequence of aesthetic insights, whereby maturity and experience gradually lead to more complex interpretations of artworks (DeSantis & Housen, 1996; Freeman, 2010; Parsons, 1987).

Understanding Christian artworks is a process that involves interpreting a message or meaning from the Christian subject matter, as these artworks overtly reference Christian themes, symbols or stories (Apostolos-Cappadona, 2005; Dillenberger, 1986; Hinnells, 2005). The interpretation process is facilitated by recognising particular symbolic conventions, which offer understanding of Christian scriptures, teachings, and traditions (Jensen, 2011; McCarthy, 2010). A long-standing association between visual art and Christianity testifies to the accessibility and efficacy of artworks in Christian religious education (Apostolos-Cappadona, 2005; Goldburg, 2006; Viladesau, 2000).

Theoretical considerations

Exploration of Catholic school children's understanding of Christian visual artworks requires consideration of a range of matters. A key theoretical concern is the contextual nature of the issue. A Catholic school is an educational setting in which a specific understanding of the world is articulated through Christian scripture, beliefs and religious traditions (Bishops of NSW and the ACT, 2007). Individuals in Catholic schools are encouraged to interact with the world in ways that reflect this Christian viewpoint. A theoretical framing of Interpretivism is used in the study to acknowledge the influence that a particular perspective can have on participants' concepts of reality and knowledge (Basit, 2010).

Practical considerations

Practical as well as theoretical concerns are addressed through the design of the study. A fundamental concern of research with young participants is the choice

of effective, realistic and ethical methods of generating data (Craig, Taylor & MacKay, 2013). This involves balancing the need to respect children as genuine participants in research, with the need for purposeful and efficient data generation to answer the research question. Some of these considerations have been resolved in the study by inviting participants to assume the role of expert, modelled on the design of previous investigations (Maras, 2008; Parsons, 1987). Whilst former studies have principally focused on exploring the aesthetic dimension of children's understanding of art, the data generation methods exemplified in these studies are sufficiently open to allow other domains of knowledge to emerge.

Research contribution

The findings of the research will contribute interdisciplinary knowledge about the ways that children in a Catholic educational context understand Christian visual artworks. The knowledge will provide educators with relevant background to appraise the efficacy of Christian artworks as resources across a range of curriculum areas. The study will also provide direction for further inquiry into ways that primary school students understand Christian visual artworks.

1.3 Justification for the research

A range of arguments justifies the need for research exploring primary school children's understanding of Christian visual artworks.

Importance of diverse learning modes

In most educational settings, the predominant approach to learning until recently has been through oral and written language (Alter, 2009; Hinnells, 2005; Millard & Marsh, 2001; Narey, 2009; Robinson, 2011). Whilst it is important to acknowledge the significant role of language as a mode of meaning making in schools, children's learning experiences should not be limited to this mode as their early endeavours to comprehend the world commonly employ visual and physical modes in addition to linguistic (Kress, 2013; Millard & Marsh, 2001; Narey, 2009; Piro, 2002). It is important for educators to provide students with opportunities to

learn and communicate through a variety of modes in order to best support their learning (Millard & Marsh, 2001). Visual artworks offer educators a significant interdisciplinary resource, which communicates personal and social knowledge of the world (Board of Studies, NSW, 2006).

Significance of images in contemporary communication

In contemporary society visual images are increasingly recognised as a significant way of communicating meaning (Arizpe & Styles, 2003; Dobbs, 1998; Goldburg, 2006, 2010). Students in Australian Catholic schools have grown up in a world where communication is often a combination of image and text, and consequently must be able to negotiate meaning making between different forms of communication (Millard & Marsh, 2001; Piro, 2002). There is a corresponding requirement to expand the concept of literacy to include visual forms of communication and to integrate visual expression into all curriculum areas (Bamford, 2003; Callow, 2008; Williams, 2007). This will assist students to construct and communicate meaning in different contexts (Board of Studies Teaching & Educational Standards NSW, 2014).

The pedagogical requirement for integrating visual communication across all curriculum areas offers potential for contemporary religious educators to explore visual artworks as a source of Christian beliefs. Artworks, like other forms of communication, use a symbolic language to communicate ideas about the world (Board of Studies, NSW, 2006). The subject matter of Christian paintings communicates Christian ideas about the world through the use of generative symbolic denotations that enrich visual meaning making (Apostolos-Cappadona, 1995; McCarthy, 2010).

Enhancing religious literacy in Australian Catholic schools

In addition to the educational challenge to increase the use of visual communication modes, the Australian Catholic sector is also challenged to pursue pedagogical developments to address declining levels of student religious literacy, or their overall understanding of the scriptures, teachings and traditions of

Catholicism (Bishops of NSW and the ACT, 2007). An investigation into the potential of Christian artworks as resources in Religious Education is timely in the light of this recommendation. Children's understanding of visual artworks as expressions of religious knowledge and tradition is largely unknown.

The subject matter or iconography of Christian visual artworks is a potentially rich resource for contemporary religious educators. Children's comprehension of the contextualised vocabulary and concepts of Religious Education requires the support of developmentally appropriate strategies and resources including sensory experiences and tangible representations (Grajczonek & Chambers, 2014). Young children in particular need visual information to scaffold understanding of unfamiliar and contextualised language (Cochrane, 2014).

Connection between Christian art and Religious Education

The gap in knowledge regarding children's understanding of Christian artworks is a problem of practical significance in contemporary Catholic education. The chronology of Western art records a substantial relationship between visual art and Christianity across many centuries, and indicates the way in which artworks have been fundamental resources, fulfilling instructive and inspirational roles in the religious education of followers for much of the history of the Church (Apostolos-Cappadona, 2005; Jensen, 2004; McCarthy, 2011; Ratzinger, 2005; Viladesau, 2000; Woods, 2012). Despite this long-standing connection, the potential of Christian artworks for enhancing contemporary students' understanding of the teachings and traditions of the Church remains largely unexplored.

1.4 Methodology

The issue at the centre of this research requires a methodology that accommodates the exploratory and interdisciplinary nature of the concern. The literature offers limited information about children's interactions with Christian artworks so a methodology that allows genuine engagement with participants to learn from their perspectives is needed. This requirement supports the use of a qualitative methodology, an approach characterised by exploration of a phenomenon in order to gain deeper understanding (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011; Creswell, 2012). In this study, therefore, data is generated through individual

interviews to directly engage with participants; to capture their first-hand accounts; to preserve their perspectives; and to minimise researcher subjectivity.

Meeting ethical standards

A key consideration in the research design is adherence to ethical standards of research. Children are potentially vulnerable research participants as they are too young to give fully informed consent (Craig, Taylor & MacKay, 2013). The research design therefore incorporates rigorous attention to the rights and interests of primary school participants. This is apparent in the voluntary nature of participation; the measures taken to ensure confidentiality of participant identities; and the acknowledgement of all participant contributions. Attention to children's rights is also evident in the clear and comprehensible language of the consent and interview processes. The consideration is further evidenced in the research process through involvement of many levels of ethical gatekeepers including: participants' parents and guardians; school executive; diocesan management; and a university ethics committee.

Generating and analysing data

Data is generated in this study through individual interviews, with each participant contributing interpretations of several artworks depicting the biblical narrative of the Annunciation to Mary (Luke 1:26-38). The full transcription of each recorded interview contributes to the research data. The analysis of this data explores patterns across children's responses to ultimately derive key themes in regard to the research question. This thematic analysis process openly acknowledges the influence that a researcher's perspective can have on concepts of reality and knowledge, and recognises that there may be other possible interpretations of the data.

1.5 Outline of the thesis

This thesis adheres to an established five-chapter structure. **Chapter 1** identifies the core research problem and presents an overview of the study context, highlighting particular issues in the Catholic education sector. **Chapter 2** examines

relevant background knowledge in the literature in order to inform the exploration of children's understanding of Christian artworks. The main areas of the literature considered are the general process of ascribing meaning to images, as well as the more particular process of interpreting Christian visual artworks. **Chapter 3** presents the elements of the conceptual framing, and the foundation on which the research knowledge claims are set. The choice of a qualitative methodology is justified in this chapter as best meeting the requirements of the study. **Chapter 4** explores the patterns and themes in the research data. The analysis is concerned with preserving the perspectives of participants, while interpreting their responses in relation to the research question. **Chapter 5** draws together the findings of the data analysis and considers the implications for educators. The knowledge established through the research is used to inform specific recommendations regarding the use of Christian artworks in primary schools. The final chapter also includes suggested areas of further research in regard to primary school children's interpretations of Christian artworks.

1.6 Definitions

This section presents the meaning of terms used within the thesis.

Aesthetic understanding

Aesthetic understanding is a term used to refer to a person's response to, or evaluation of an artwork, in order to make sense of it (Parsons, 1987). In other words, aesthetic understanding is a meaning-making activity. It typically engages the senses and emotions as well as the intellect in ascribing meaning to an artwork (Alter, 2009). In this study, aesthetic understanding is a concept considered specifically in relation to visual artworks.

Christian art/artworks

Christian art can refer broadly to any artwork that evokes a spiritual response from Christians (Brown, 2008). For purposes of this study, however, Christian art is specified as artworks that overtly reference Christian themes, symbols, or stories (Apostolos-Cappadona, 2005; Brown, 2008; Dillenberger, 1986; Hinnells, 2005). Whilst Christian art embraces a variety of media including painting, sculpture, architecture, dance, drama and music (Hinnells, 1990, 2005; Jensen, 2004), this study focuses exclusively on Christian paintings or visual artworks.

These works provide a well-recognised form of Christian expression (McCarthy, 2010).

Christian iconography

Iconography is literally "writing with images" (Dillenberger, 1986, p. 16). The iconography of an artwork is understood here as synonymous with subject matter. The pictorial elements that comprise the subject matter or iconography of Christian artworks can contain layers of meaning that demand experience and strategic activity to understand (Alter, 2009). The conventions of Christian iconography contribute rich symbolic meanings, and have been likened to a language that gives viewers greater access to Christian scriptures, teachings and traditions (McCarthy, 2010).

Literacy

Literacy may be broadly understood as the skills needed for "making sense of the world" (O'Rourke, 2005, p. 1). Within the setting of this study, literacy is more specifically defined as the ability to "communicate and comprehend effectively in a wide variety of contexts, modes and media" (Board of Studies Teaching & Educational Standards NSW (BOSTES), 2014). Whilst the English curriculum has a particular focus on developing student literacy, all curriculum areas are accountable for supporting students to construct meaning and express understanding to others (BOSTES NSW, 2014). Literacy clearly involves both general and subject specific mastery of a range of modes of expression (ACARA, 2013).

Religious Education

Religious Education, as used here, refers to a specific curriculum area within Australian Catholic schools. In Catholic schools Religious Education has equivalent status to learning areas mandated by government education authorities such as English and Mathematics. A Catholic Religious Education curriculum is a diocesan-based program, and covers all dimensions of classroom teaching and learning in this subject area (Ryan, 2014).

Religious literacy

Religious literacy, whilst prone to various meanings according to context, is a term recognised here as an educational notion. It involves knowledge or understanding of the key concepts and vocabulary of a particular faith tradition

(Dwyer as cited in Goldburg, 2010; Grajczonek, 2007). Religious literacy in the Catholic tradition encompasses familiarity with the core teachings, scriptures, history and traditions of the Catholic faith that comprise the content of the Religious Education curriculum (Bishops of NSW and the ACT, 2007).

1.7 Summary of Chapter One

This chapter has presented the research problem at the core of this study, which is knowledge about the forms of understanding that Catholic primary school students demonstrate through their interpretations of Christian visual artworks. The study has been located within a particular educational context and justified on the basis of significant issues in the Australian Catholic education sector. The qualitative methodology of the study has been outlined, along with the structure of the thesis. Definitions have been provided for the key concepts in the study.

A principle consideration in the research design is adherence to ethical standards of research with young children. As specified in this chapter, the study seeks to respectfully acknowledge and accurately represent the contributions of all participants. The concern for preserving participant voices is threaded throughout all elements of the research process as indicated by the thesis title, which quotes directly from a young participant.

Overall, this chapter sets the scene for the research study. The following chapter will develop a more detailed understanding of current knowledge about children's interpretations of Christian artworks through a review of relevant literature. The review will begin from a broad viewpoint on the process of interpreting visual artworks, then focus more specifically on the process of interpreting Christian visual art. This knowledge will in turn provide necessary background information for the study methodology.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the literature in order to develop background knowledge pertaining to children's interpretations of Christian artworks. The review commences with literature that describes a broad perspective on the process of interpreting visual artworks. It then focuses more specifically on existing knowledge regarding the process of interpreting Christian visual art. The final level of particularity is attention to the particular artworks incorporated in participant interviews, and therefore pivotal to the study methodology.

2.2 Interpreting visual artworks

Visual art is one of a range of artforms that contribute significantly to people's meaningful interaction with the world (Board of Studies, NSW, 2006). Visual art offers opportunities for expression and communication of both personal and shared meanings, and encourages exploration of "social and cultural values about spiritual and worldly beliefs" (Board of Studies, NSW, 2006, p. 6).

Understanding or interpreting visual artworks involves the use of individual reflection and expressive language skills, in order to ascribe meaning to images (Danko-McGhee, 2006). This is a complex activity to which individuals bring prior knowledge and their own perspective (CEDP, 2010; Cochrane, 2014). Art interpretation comprises understanding a message communicated by the subject matter of an artwork, which may be variously realistic, symbolic or abstractly representative. The term 'iconography', which is literally "writing with images, or communicating via pictures" (Dillenberger, 1986, p. 16) may be used to describe the subject matter of an artwork. All artworks are recognised as containing layers of iconographic meaning that require experience and strategic activity to understand (Alter, 2009).

Active and contextual understanding

Communication through images such as artworks is fundamentally comparable to other communication systems, with a sender and a receiver of meaning (Freeman, 2008). In educational settings, children need to be able to recognise that pictures, like words, essentially communicate aspects of the world. This requires drawing on previous meaning making experiences and contextual knowledge (CEDP, 2010; Cochrane, 2014; Piro, 2002; Walsh, 2006). Children's social and cultural contexts will predispose them to construct meaning in particular ways that reflect their life experiences (CEDP, 2010; Jensen, 2004; Pantaleo, 2013; Piro, 2000). In other words, social and cultural beliefs, values and opinions can influence the way in which a child makes sense of visual communication (O'Rourke, 2005).

Visual meaning making is not a passive operation but a creative and dynamic activity where the "perceiver must enter into the creation of the experience" (Empereur, 1990, p. 169). The subject matter of an image is comprehended in the light of existing knowledge and experience (Alter, 2009; Frei, 1999; Jensen, 2004; Plate, 2002). New understanding is constructed from present understanding, and influenced by contextual factors such as religion, gender and ethnicity (Cochrane, 2014; Plate, 2002). Viewers will take a particular perspective in their endeavours to interpret artworks, and so construct individual meanings that reflect their understanding and experience of the world to date (Alter, 2009; Frei, 1999).

Whilst experiential and contextual influences lead to individual art interpretations, there are also some recognised commonalities in visual meaning construction. One common element, as noted above, is the use of prior knowledge to interpret what is seen since "we can only interpret in regard to what we know" (Hoffert, 2009, p. 2). This process of using prior knowledge to recognise and make meaning in new visual encounters is similar to the process used in encounters with print (Frei, 1999). What is perceived is influenced by what a viewer anticipates encountering (Alter, 2009). Thus, the activation of concepts already stored in the mind helps to provide the ground for visual meaning making as with linguistic meaning making (Cochrane, 2014).

Informational-aesthetic continuum of understanding

Another characteristic of visual meaning making is the way that viewing purpose influences interpretation of an image (Frei, 1999; Walsh, 2006). The relationship between viewing purpose and visual understanding can be explained by comparison with the reading process. Readers generally adopt a purpose or stance for reading, which will influence their interaction with a text (Alter, 2009; Frei, 1999). This stance varies along a continuum from an exclusively informational or analytical purpose, through to a wholly aesthetic or affective one (Galda & Liang, 2003; Pantaleo, 2013; Rosenblatt, 1994). Individuals reading for an informational purpose will generally restrict their focus of attention to locating and synthesising specific information from a text, while at the other end of the continuum are readers who approach texts aesthetically, using emotion and imagination to become immersed in the experience (Alter, 2009; Galda & Liang, 2003; Rosenblatt, 1994).

A similar informational-aesthetic continuum is thought to exert an influence on visual meaning making (Frei, 1999; Walsh, 2006). Viewers who are interacting with an image for an informational purpose will confine their attention to gathering visual information in an analytical way (Alter, 2009). In a sense, an informational purpose situates a viewer outside the image, looking for concepts that can be recognised by others or "public referents of meaning" (Pantaleo, 2013, p. 127). Viewers who are engaging with an image aesthetically, on the other hand, will be more concerned with comprehending personal significance from an image, utilising an inward focus, or "an intense involvement of attention ... for no other reason than to sustain the interaction"(Csikzentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990, p. 178).

Importantly, however, encounters with images or texts are not necessarily restricted to one end of the informational-aesthetic continuum. Rather, individuals regularly move along the continuum in the course of interacting with any one linguistic or visual text, drawing on both intellectual and emotional aspects of meaning (Frei, 1999; Rosenblatt, 1994). Children are believed to have a natural inclination to interpret images from both an aesthetic position, engaging emotionally and imaginatively with them, and from an informational position, listing and describing particular details of the image (Frei, 1999).

Holistic understanding

The potential for complex and holistic meaning making is a feature of interactions with visual artworks (Csikzentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990; Jensen, 2004; Miles, 1985; Miller, 2003). Visual art encounters present perceptual and intellectual challenges as well as evoking emotional engagement (Alter, 2009; Apostolos-Cappadona, 2005; Cornett, 2011; Dobbs, 1998; Harris, 1988). The holistic nature of encounters with visual art makes it a particularly appropriate meaning-making medium for young children as it assists their understanding and use of contextual language and concepts (Cochrane, 2014; Grajczonek, 2007).

The comprehension of an image involves intellectual reasoning that draws on associations with prior knowledge and contextual factors (Alter, 2009). The plurality and depth of meaning within visual artworks requires sustained intellectual pursuit (McCarthy, 2010). Unlike the meaning of a written text, which mostly unfolds gradually and sequentially, the meaning of an image seems to be presented all at once (Alter, 2009; Callow, 2008; Walsh, 2006). Visual meaning making can be conceptualised as a relational rather than linear process (Alter, 2009; Goldburg, 2010). Viewers can move between interpretations of individual elements in a picture to interpretation of the whole image. The integration of pictorial details into a whole leads to the construction of enhanced meaning as the visual experience is interpreted and reinterpreted (Frei, 1999; Goldburg, 2010).

In addition to the intellectual engagement prompted by visual art encounters, the innate power of art to stimulate emotional response is pivotal to its usefulness in educational contexts (Hornik & Parsons, 2006). Pictures are championed as lasting longer in the memory and being easier to recall than words (Alter, 2009; Viladesau, 2000). This is due to their characteristic tendency to encourage "understanding with feeling" (Empereur, 1990, p.168). This means that the subject matter of Christian artworks may be potentially accessed from all points of the informational-aesthetic continuum. With the interpretation of a biblical artwork, for example, the narrative details and Christian message of the depicted event may be drawn forth from a viewer's intellectual engagement, to combine powerfully with the personal reflection and connections that emerge as a result of aesthetic engagement (Viladesau, 2000).

Empirical studies of visual art interpretation

Practical studies of the way in which people understand artworks have contributed a body of knowledge about the process of visual meaning making (van Meel-Jansen, 2006). Two research approaches are evident: one focuses on the content of people's interpretations of visual artworks, and is characterised by developmental models of aesthetic understanding (DeSantis & Housen, 1996; Parsons, 1987; van Meel-Jansen, 2006); the other approach focuses on the reasoning strategies involved in people's interpretations of visual artworks, and is characterised by relational models of perception about art (Freeman, 1991, 2008, 2010; Maras, 2008, 2010).

The two research approaches – developmental and relational - are understood here as complementary rather than competing. Both approaches view the process of art interpretation as a cognitively meaningful and challenging activity, taking a broad understanding of cognition that also includes affective aspects (Freeman & Parsons, 2001; Parsons, 1987). Common to both approaches is recognition that the ordinary language used by people in encounters with artworks provides a reliable window into their underlying reasoning strategies and beliefs. Additional common ground between the two research approaches is seen in their recognition of development in understanding art as a journey towards conceptual complexity, which gradually incorporates awareness of the subjectivity of viewing (Freeman, 2010; Parsons, 1987).

Both developmental and relational theories of the way in which people understand artworks offer valuable knowledge to educators. In this study greater emphasis is given to research focusing on the content of people's interpretations of visual artworks, particularly the work of DeSantis & Housen (1996), Parsons (1987) and van Meel-Jansen, (2006). The developmental models of aesthetic understanding proposed by these theorists have particular resonance with the developmental theories of learning that underpin the organisation of primary school pedagogy and curricula.

Relational models of visual art interpretation

Relational models of visual art interpretation propose that understanding an artwork involves psychologically negotiating relationships between four essential entities. These entities are: the artwork; a situation in the world to which the artwork refers; the artist; and the viewer. In other words, relational models of art interpretation focus on the mental processes governing the way people make sense of art (Freeman, 1991, 2008, 2010; Maras, 2008, 2010). Findings from these investigations suggest that a person's cognitive awareness of and ability to coordinate the relations between these four entities changes with maturity and viewing experience (Freeman, 2008).

Relational models of visual meaning making suggest that young or inexperienced viewers are only aware of an artwork as representing something in the world. With further experience of art, this naïve situation is extended to recognition of the influence of the artist who created the work, as well as contextual influences on artworks (Freeman, 2010). Cognisance of a third component of visual meaning, the viewer's own subjectivity, is the last to be incorporated into visual awareness (Freeman, 2008). Viewers' realisation of their subjectivity in art interpretation enables them to see how individual perspectives may contribute to interpreting artworks. Further studies have mapped critical points along the trajectory from naïve to more complex interpretations of visual artworks. This research has indicated characteristic changes in the process of children's visual art interpretation across the age span of primary school (Maras, 2008, 2010).

Developmental models of visual art interpretation

Developmental models of visual art interpretation focus on the content or substance of what people say in their interpretations, and propose a characteristic developmental progression in the ideas that people use to talk about visual artworks (DeSantis & Housen, 1996; Parsons, 1987; van Meel-Jansen, 2006). According to developmental models of understanding art, people develop increasingly complex insights into aesthetic ideas with maturity, experience and education, which in turn influence their aesthetic perceptions and preferences (DeSantis & Housen, 1996;

Parsons, 1987; van Meel-Jansen, 2006).   These fundamental aesthetic ideas are concepts such as colour, subject matter, expressiveness and style (Cannon, 2005; Parsons, 1987).

Developmental theories suggest that children generally notice and appreciate an artwork on the basis of the aesthetic concepts of colour and subject matter (Lin, 2004; Parsons, 1987; van Meel-Jansen, 2006). Studies show that colour and other sensory properties of artworks are most important in the art interpretations and preferences of younger children, while for older children subject matter is a more significant consideration in art interpretation (Cannon, 2005; Parsons, 1987). More mature viewers may favour additional aesthetic ideas to interpret artworks, such as expressiveness and artistic style (Parsons, 1987; van Meel-Jansen, 2006).

Aesthetic topics

Developmental models of understanding about art indicate that a progression of insights into common aesthetic topics influence how people make sense of visual artworks (Parsons, 1987). The most likely aesthetic topics to influence primary school children's interpretations of visual art are colour, subject matter and emotional expression (Cannon, 2005; Parsons, 1987; van Meel-Jansen, 2006). Developmental insights into these key aesthetic topics are discussed in turn below.

Colour

The aesthetic aspect that first influences an individual's interpretation of artworks is colour (Lin, 2004; Parsons, 1987; van Meel-Jansen, 2006). Young viewers are intrinsically attracted to pictures with strong colours, and this is what makes the image meaningful for them (Parsons, 1987; van Meel-Jansen, 2006). Other sensory properties such as texture, shape and light are also intuitively attractive in this early viewing stage. Often young viewers demonstrate the idea of favourites when talking about artworks, enjoying the appearance of a picture for its own sake (Cannon, 2005). In other words, liking the colour or another sensory property of an artwork appears a more important concern than understanding the subject matter. This means the lack of a familiar subject is not necessarily an issue for young viewers, as long as the picture is colourful (Danko-McGhee & Slutsky, 2011; Parsons, 1987).

Colour continues to be a consideration in children's interpretation of art as they mature. There is however a changing understanding about colour with maturity. The initial naïve and intuitive delight in colours develops into an appreciation of colours as good for a specific purpose, rather than just being personally liked (Parsons, 1987). In other words, the tendency to prefer pictures with favourite colours matures to an appreciation of colours that are judged realistic for the subject matter. A later insight into the aesthetic topic of colour is the ability to appreciate colours as appropriately expressive for the subject matter, such as bright colours contributing a happy feeling to subject matter and dark colours suggesting unhappy feelings (Parsons, 1987; van Meel-Jansen, 2006).

Subject matter

A second aesthetic aspect that influences children's interpretation of artworks is subject matter (Lin, 2004; van Meel-Jansen, 2006). Young children tend to make concrete observations about the subject matter of a picture and look for what is familiar and liked (DeSantis & Housen, 1996). They are often aware of the subject of an artwork but rather than attending fully to it "they allow associations and memories freely to enter their response" (Parsons, 1987, p. 22). They may attend to individual components when talking about an image rather than to the picture as a whole, and they may accept whatever topic comes to mind without considering whether or not it is relevant (DeSantis & Housen, 1996; Parsons, 1987).

Children gradually develop the cognitive ability to integrate the individual details of a picture into a whole, and use this to understand the picture's meaning (Frei, 1999; van Meel-Jansen, 2006). They begin to look for an overall concept, theme or message in an image, and tend to reject images such as abstract artworks from which they cannot gain an overall sense of the meaning (Frei, 1999; Lin, 2004). The meaning of an artwork becomes linked with the interpretation of the subject matter as "realism helps to clarify the content of the artistic message" (van Meel-Jansen, 2006, p. 110). A realistic representation at this stage of aesthetic development is one that corresponds to the viewer's expectation of a subject. They draw on their own perceptions, their understanding of the world, and the familiar values of their sociocultural context to comprehend a picture (DeSantis & Housen, 1996; Parsons,

1987). This is complemented by a growing acknowledgement of the artistic ability and skills reflected in an artwork.

Emotional expression

A third aesthetic aspect that influences an individual's interpretation of artworks is insight into emotional expression. The trajectory of development in this aesthetic topic begins with recognising the feelings of people depicted in images through their facial expressions, gestures and actions (Freeman & Parsons, 2001; Parsons, 1987). Even very young children perceive the feelings of people depicted in an artwork through recognising observable features of body language.

Initially, children focus on the emotions of depicted figures in isolation to each other. Gradually, however they begin to take into account the feelings of all figures in a painting, "to relate them to each other, and sometimes to elaborate a story that will make sense of the whole" (Parsons, 1987, p. 62). A further development is the ability to recognise the expression of emotion through colour or symbols of a paintings as well as the body language of figures (van Meel-Jansen, 2006).

Children's increasing insights into the topics of colour, subject matter and emotional expression are matched by other psychological progressions that influence art interpretation. Over time individuals move from an initial self-centred viewpoint in understanding visual art, toward increasing awareness of other points of view, and ultimately of one's own subjectivity in visual meaning making (Freeman, 2008; Parsons, 1987). This psychological growth enables children to develop the concept of representation – that is, the notion of the resemblance between a picture and a subject in the world, and how this will generally have some agreement with what is perceived by others (Parsons, 1987). The increasing awareness of subjectivity in visual meaning making aligns aesthetic development with patterns of cognitive development in other domains.

Overall, developmental insights into the aesthetic topics of colour, subject matter and emotional expression explain how children understand and show preferences for particular artworks. These topics are acknowledged in Visual Arts

education as integral aspects of children's responses to artworks from the earliest years in primary school, where children are encouraged to recognise and appreciate artworks, and communicate their preferences, based on aesthetic features such as colour, subject matter and emotions (Board of Studies, NSW, 2006). The presence of these aesthetic ideas or topics across the developmental continuum of visual meaning making suggests substantive content markers for analysing children's interpretations of Christian visual artworks in this study.

2.3 Interpreting Christian visual artworks

Art interpretation is a complex activity influenced by experience and maturity. Interpreting Christian artworks involves understanding overt references to Christian themes, symbols or stories (Apostolos-Cappadona, 2005; Brown, 2008; Dillenberger, 1986; Hinnells, 2005). Christian art embraces a variety of media including painting, sculpture, architecture, drama and music, to form a significant component of Western art (Hinnells, 1990, 2005; Jensen, 2004; McLeish, 1993). The extensive patrimony of Christian artworks intimates the importance of art in Christian worship and meaning making (Miles, 1985). Across the centuries, Christian artworks have served to "open the mind, heart and soul in a way that enlivened faith and understanding" (McCarthy, 2011, p. 2).

For the purposes of this study the focus is limited to Christian visual art. These works are a well-recognised vehicle of Christian expression, originally encountered in the context of individual and communal worship (Miles, 1985). Christian visual artworks are found today throughout the Western world in art galleries, museums, schools, private homes, and churches (Daily, 2009).

The purpose of Christian artworks

The overall purpose of visual artworks throughout Christian history has been to bring followers nearer to God (Brown, 2008). This broad purpose combines two complementary aspects: a pedagogical or instructive function, such as teaching about biblical narratives; and a faith inspiring function, such as enriching prayer and worship (Brown, 2008). In other words, Christian artworks have both informational and spiritual meaning for followers (Apostolos-Cappadona, 1995).

Historically, an encounter with a Christian artwork helped focus adherents' senses, emotions and intellect on worship experiences and did not involve aesthetic appreciation (Miles, 1985). Today, however, in non-worship settings such as art galleries or classrooms, encountering a Christian artwork is more likely to involve understanding both aesthetic dimensions and the meaning of an artwork's subject matter or iconography.

The development of Christian art and iconography

Christian iconography is the subject matter of Christian artworks, drawn from Christian liturgical texts, scriptures and teaching (Cook, 2005). It incorporates signs and symbols that engage the viewer and "illuminate the pedagogical and spiritual meaning" of artworks (Apostolos-Cappadona, 1995, p.3). These conventions imbue Christian artworks with rich symbolic meanings that offer viewers access to scriptures, teachings and traditions (Apostolos-Cappadona, 1995; Brown, 2008; McCarthy, 2011; Ratzinger, 2005). Christian iconography includes conventions of colour, clothing, posture and setting, which present a chronological touchstone of the beliefs and attitudes of Christian culture (Hornik & Parsons, 2006; Viladesau, 2000).

An appreciation of Christian art and iconography requires some understanding of its chronological development. The iconography of Christian artworks has changed over time to reflect historical and cultural expressions of Christianity (Hornik & Parsons, 2006; Loverance, 2007; McLeish, 1993; Miles, 1985; Viladesau, 2000). The ensuing description synthesises the development of Christian art and iconography, but does not aim to present a detailed history, as this is beyond both the scope and purpose of this study. Rather, the review presents a general outline of fundamental periods in Christian art and related developments in Christian iconography, as relevant background knowledge for the study. (N.B. Dates given in the outline use the calendar convention Common Era, abbreviated to CE).

Chronological outline of Christian art and iconography

<u>1st to 3rd century CE</u>

The historical record of Christian art can be traced back to the initial faith communities of the first to third centuries. The iconography of Christian artworks from this period was mainly symbolic and reflected the Greco-Roman context from which Christianity emerged (Loverance, 2007; McLeish, 1993). The fundamental subject matter of these artworks dealt with good triumphing over evil and the path to salvation (Loverance, 2007).

<u>4th to 5th century CE</u>

When the Roman emperor Constantine embraced Christianity in the early 4th century CE, Christian art became more prevalent in both private and public settings (Loverance, 2007; Miles, 1985). Artworks were seen as appropriate visual presentations of Church creeds and biblical narratives for the largely illiterate followers of that time (Miles, 1985; O'Kane, 2007; Piro, 2002; Viladesau, 2000; Woods, 2012). During this period, church councils established Christian beliefs on the nature of Jesus Christ, as well as his mother Mary, which had an influence on Christian iconography (Cook, 2005; Loverance, 2007).

<u>5th to 14th century CE</u>

Theological disputes arose within the Christian Church, which resulted eventually in two distinct branches of Christianity: a Western branch led from Rome; and an Eastern branch led from Constantinople (Loverance, 2007). Different forms of Christian iconography subsequently developed in these two branches, whereby Eastern iconography reflected the theology and culture of the East, and Western iconography reflected the theological and cultural influences of Rome.

In the Western world at this time there was broad patronage of the arts by the Christian Church, and Christian images were a ubiquitous feature of life (McLeish, 1993). References to everyday activities become incorporated in artistic depictions of Church teachings, scriptural narratives, and the lives of saints (Cook, 2005). By the 12th century the role of art in the Western Church developed a more overtly spiritual function, appealing to viewers' imagination and feelings (Jensen, 2011). It

was characterised by iconography that sought to inspire awareness and exploration of the transcendent (Benedict XVI, 2009; Miller, 2003). This iconography complemented the architectural style of church buildings, which were designed to represent the kingdom of heaven (Cook, 2005).

14th to 15th century CE

As Christendom in the West moved into the 15th century there was renewed interest in Greco-Roman literature and art. The Renaissance movement embraced a naturalistic style of depiction (Loverance, 2007), which influenced Christian iconography so that scriptural renderings depicted three-dimensional figures and settings "that emphasized their reality in the natural world" (Cook, 2005, p. 4347). Strong Church patronage for the visual arts ensured that Christian iconography was a substantial feature of the work of prominent artists of this time (Loverance, 2007).

16th to 17th century CE

In the 16th and 17th centuries there were significant changes in the organisation and practice of Western Christianity, which inspired artists to "plumb greater depths of religious feeling in their works" (Loverance, 2007, p. 38). Protestant artists favoured iconography that encouraged theological reflection through use of realistic detail and carefully adherence to biblical texts (Cook, 2005; Loverance, 2007). Catholic artists tended to more elaborate and decorative iconography, seeking to encourage viewers' spiritual responses (Cook, 2005; Loverance, 2007).

18th to 20th century CE

The Western Church's influence on Christian iconographic conventions lessened in the 18th century. Increasing secularisation and consumerism in the wake of the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, resulted in the growth of individual rather than ecclesial expressions of religious understanding (Cook, 2005; Goldburg, 2006; Jensen, 2011; McLeish, 1993). The disengagement between artistic expression and Christian iconography was consistent with a wider disconnect between religion and Western culture from the 19th century onwards (Ledbetter, 2001; Miles, 1985). The broad spread of Church patronage that had influenced the conventions of Christian iconography for many centuries diminished significantly.

The shift towards an individual aesthetic focus in the domain of visual art became more pronounced in the 20th century. A key development in Christian iconography was the way in which abstract art opened "the possibility for a broadly Christian iconography without recognizable subject matter" (Cook, 2005, p. 4349). Colour and expressionism became the means of artistically communicating religious beliefs and feelings (Loverance, 2007). Also noteworthy was the effect of the 20th century Christian ecumenical movement, which encouraged Christian communities to express their cultures and incorporate indigenous motifs in Christian iconography (Cook, 2005; Loverance, 2007).

Overall the historical record of Christian art reveals that Christian iconography has changed over time to reflect varying historical purposes and cultural expressions (Cook, 2005; Hornik & Parsons, 2006; Loverance, 2007; Viladesau, 2000). Christian iconography can be viewed as a language that reflects the societies in which it develops and offers a visual record of religious concerns of believers over the ages (Loverance, 2007).

Christian art and biblical understanding

A particularly significant connection exists throughout Christian history between the iconography of Christian artworks and enhancing biblical understanding (McCarthy, 2010; O'Kane, 2008). Artworks based on scripture have been lauded by the Catholic Church as enriching and dynamically presenting the Bible in a form that improves accessibility for those with low levels of literacy, as well as supplementing written text for the literate (Benedict XVI, 2009; Jensen, 2004; John Paul II, 1999; Paul VI, cited in Benedict XVI, 2009). The iconographic conventions of biblical artworks have functioned similarly to commentaries on scripture, encouraging comprehension and spiritual belief (Jensen, 2011).

The role of biblical artworks in communicating knowledge and encouraging contemplation is linked to the way art facilitates imagination and feeling (Woods, 2012). The role of imagination is important in comprehending biblical narratives - both linguistic and visual - as it helps integrate individual elements into a deeper

understanding of scriptural meaning (O'Kane, 2008). Furthermore, the affective and experiential dimensions of art contribute to biblical images staying in the mind longer than words, thereby offering enhanced instructional efficacy (Jensen, 2004; Woods, 2012).

The academic tradition of the Christian Church demonstrates an understanding of ascending levels of interpretation of scriptural narrative from literal to inferential and allegorical (Jensen, 2004). A congruent pattern of meaning making is found across both visual and verbal expressions of scripture, lending support to the role of images in enhancing scriptural encounters (Viladesau, 2000). Visual depictions of scripture, like the written text, offer various levels of meaning and help make the text accessible to all members of the Church (McCarthy, 2010; Viladesau, 2000).

It is important to recognise that both verbal and visual forms of scripture are open to individual interpretation. There are many parallels made between the subjective interpreting of a biblical artwork and interpreting written text (Miles, 1985; O'Kane, 2007). A viewer or reader's prior experience will predispose them to particular expectations, and substantially influence the meaning attributed to the scriptural artwork or text. "Questions are formed in our mind that seek to discover either resonance and recognition, or even dissonance, from some previous experience" (Mallaby, 2010, p. 127). Interpretation is dependent on the perspective of the respondent, and can be influenced by factors such as cultural context, education, and viewing experience (Miles, 1985; Plate, 2002).

Understanding the iconography of a Christian artwork is one facet of interpretation influenced by prior experience. Concepts already present in the mind are the ground from which the subject matter in pictures will be understood (Mallaby, 2010). This means that whilst people may encounter the same artwork they are unlikely to understand it the same way. Additionally, the environment in which a scriptural image or text is encountered may also influence its reception. Greater religious meaning may be made when the encounter is "situated within an environment conducive to belief, devotion and transformation" (Plate, 2002, p. 11).

The value of artworks in enhancing biblical understanding is seen to be most effective when used in tandem with written biblical text. The counter play between the two modes offers enriched biblical understanding as insights from a picture are integrated with prior knowledge of the scripture story (Jensen, 2004). Viewing, like reading, necessitates resourceful meaning-making strategies. A viewer needs to imagine what went before and after an event represented in an artwork, as well as recognise a scriptural artwork as an interpretation, in order to derive substantial meaning from it (Jensen, 2004).

2.4 Interpreting artworks of the Annunciation to Mary

One of the biblical narratives frequently chosen as a subject in Christian artworks over Church history is the story of the Annunciation to Mary (Apostolos-Cappadona, 1995). These artworks have supplemented understanding of the written biblical text by dynamically presenting aspects of the story (Jensen, 2004).

The biblical account of the Annunciation to Mary (Luke 1:26-38)

The biblical story of the Annunciation to Mary is a key passage found in the first chapter of Luke's gospel (Luke 1:26-38). It records how Mary, a young Jewish woman, was chosen by God to be the mother of His Son, Jesus. An angel conveys this message to Mary, informing her that this baby is the realisation of Old Testament prophecy regarding a Messiah. Mary questions the angel over how such an event will come to be, and is told that it will be through the power of the Holy Spirit. Whilst overcome by the import of God's request, Mary faithfully accepts the mission to be the mother of God's Son.

There are many different translations of the Bible and therefore various scriptural accounts of the Annunciation to Mary. The translation used in this study is from the *Contemporary English Bible*. This translation uses more accessible language than other versions, and has Catholic Church endorsement for use with children. The translation is given below.

Luke 1:26-38

God sent the angel Gabriel to the town of Nazareth in Galilee with a message for a young woman named Mary. She was engaged to Joseph from the family of King David. The angel greeted Mary and said, "You are truly blessed! The Lord is with you." Mary was confused by the angel's words and wondered what they meant. Then the angel told Mary, "Don't be afraid! God is pleased with you, and you will have a son. His name will be Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of God Most High. The Lord God will make him king, as his ancestor David was. He will rule the people of Israel forever, and his kingdom will never end." Mary asked the angel, "How can this happen? I am not married!" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come down to you, and God's power will come over you. So your child will be called the holy Son of God. Your relative Elizabeth is also going to have a son, even though she is old. No one thought she could ever have a baby, but in three months she will have a son. Nothing is impossible for God!" Mary said, "I am the Lord's servant! Let it happen as you have said." And the angel left her.

Children's understanding of the Annunciation narrative

The Christian faith tradition, like many other religious traditions, uses stories to convey meaning and values (Ryan, 2014). Biblical stories and narratives are a key component of Catholic primary school Religious Education programs. These stories may be presented using various pedagogically effective strategies, such as music, movement and drama, which facilitate student engagement. The narrative of the Annunciation to Mary is a significant Bible story introduced to students from their earliest years in a Catholic school. It is pivotal in the Christian cycle of readings over the liturgical season of Advent. This means that students encounter the Annunciation scripture each school year and are encouraged to develop deepening knowledge of it.

Children in Catholic schools may also encounter the Annunciation narrative through recitation of the Angelus, a Catholic prayer founded on the narrative in Luke's gospel. The prayer commemorates the incarnation of God in human form, and reiterates Mary's faith-filled response to the angel. Students may participate in this prayer as part of daily school rhythms, giving them an opportunity to regularly engage with the Annunciation story in a prayerful mode.

The narrative of the Annunciation to Mary whilst presented in this study as a discrete event is of course closely connected to events that precede and follow it in the Gospel of Luke. The Annunciation is best understood as part of a series of episodes that make up the first two chapters of Luke's gospel. The introductory chapters gradually unveil aspects of Jesus' identity and prepare the reader for the ensuing account of His life and teachings (Karris, 1990).

The Annunciation narrative and Christian beliefs

A number of key Christian beliefs can be understood from the narrative of the Annunciation including: the Incarnation; the nature of Jesus' kingship; Mary's grace and obedience to God; and God's authority and love – beliefs expounded in full in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (John Paul II, 1992). Scriptural understanding, which is integral to the Religious Education curriculum in Catholic schools, enhances students' awareness of these and other core Christian beliefs.

The theological **concept of the Incarnation** is explained in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) as the union of divine and human natures in Jesus Christ (CCC, 1992, #461). The angel Gabriel describes the moment of the Incarnation: "The Holy Spirit will come down to you, and God's power will come over you. So your child will be called the holy Son of God" (Luke 1:35). The scriptural account of the Annunciation introduces students to the concept of Jesus as fully human and fully divine, as part of a narrative that becomes more meaningful with maturity and experience.

The nature of Jesus' kingship is another concept highlighted in the account of the Annunciation. The angel tells Mary, "He will be great and will be called the Son of God Most High. The Lord God will make him king, as his ancestor David was. He will rule the people of Israel forever, and his kingdom will never end" (Luke 1:32-33). The narrative presents a range of designations for Jesus and these references set out the ways in which he will be recognised as king (Karris, 1990; Ryan, 2012). Whilst students may not fully comprehend the references, these titles should become increasingly familiar through regular encounters with the scripture.

Mary's grace and obedience to God is another crucial theme in the Annunciation narrative. Whilst she was initially overcome by the angel's message, Mary's response to God is one of wholehearted faith: "I am the Lord's servant! Let it happen as you have said" (Luke 1:38). Mary's grace is key to God choosing her to be the mother of His Son (Fallon, 1981), and her obedient consent provides a model for all believers. At the same time, the narrative presents Mary with recognisable human qualities of doubt, fear and wonder. Mary's obedient response to God in spite of her concerns is something that students are encouraged to reflect on as a model for their own lives.

God's authority and love are additional concepts brought to light by the Annunciation narrative. The birth of Jesus enables the fulfilment of God's plan for the salvation of all humankind. Throughout the Old Testament prophets speak for God and describe the coming Messiah. A key prophecy is Isaiah 7:14, "The Lord will give you a sign in any case: It is this: the young woman is with child and will give birth to a son whom she will call Immanuel". The Annunciation narrative makes clear that God's authority to achieve this plan is unquestionable, as the angel emphatically states, "Nothing is impossible for God!" (Luke 1:37). The narrative also shows that this ultimate authority is balanced by love, as Mary is reassured, "Don't be afraid! God is pleased with you, and you will have a son" (Luke 1:28). The image of God that students encounter in the Annunciation narrative is both commanding and comforting.

Overall, the scriptural narrative of the Annunciation to Mary incorporates a range of significant Christian beliefs. For Catholic primary school students it is a story that will be encountered regularly throughout their years at school, allowing them to gradually deepen their scriptural understanding.

Iconographic traditions in Annunciation paintings

There are many iconographic traditions incorporated in Annunciation paintings that offer viewers insights into Christian scripture and traditions (Boss, 2008; Schiller, 1971). Depictions of Mary in Christian art first become noticeable around the 5th century in the form of icons or mosaics providing a prayer focus for

worshippers (Loverance, 2007). Early iconography of the Annunciation shows Mary as a young woman holding a spindle or woven cloth (Apostolos-Cappadona, 1995; Schiller, 1971). During the Medieval period Annunciation iconography comes to include symbolic clothing, postures and botanical symbols that denote regard for Mary's virtue, prayerfulness and obedience to God (Apostolos-Cappadona, 1995; Cook, 2005). A focus on the theology of the Incarnation during the Renaissance is reflected in the recurrent use of the Annunciation as a subject in art during this period (Apostolos-Cappadona, 1995).

A selection of Annunciation paintings

This section introduces the twelve artworks of the biblical narrative of the Annunciation to Mary that are the focus material for participant artwork interpretations. Whilst comprising predominantly figurative rather than abstract approaches to depicting the subject matter of the Annunciation, the twelve works offer variation in artistic style (see Appendix A). The images span 600 years of Christian art history, representing both historical and cultural differences in Christian iconography. At the same time, the artworks highlight the continuity of many conventions in paintings of the Annunciation across chronological and geological spans.

The ensuing discussion presents some contextual background for each of the Annunciation images used in participant interviews, and identifies aspects of each work's Christian iconography. The explanations of the artworks are informed by relevant literature but are not proposed as expert opinion. Rather, the following interpretations, similarly to the interpretations offered by participants in the study, emanate from a particular viewpoint. The following artwork interpretations reflect the agency of the researcher's role in a qualitative study, and acknowledge that all meaning making is subjective and dependent on prior knowledge and experience.

A selection of Annunciation paintings

P. & J. Limbourg - *Annunciation* (ca. 1405 -1409 CE)

Tatiana Grant - *Icon of the Annunciation* (Late 20th century CE

Fra Angelico - *Annunciation* (1433-34 CE)

Fra Filippo Lippi - *Annunciation* (ca. 1440 CE)

Richard Franklin - *Annunciation IV* (ca. 1990 CE)

Peter Paul Rubens - *Annunciation* (1609-10 CE)

William Brassey Hole - *Annunciation* (ca. 1890 CE)

Nicolas Ghika – *Annunciation* (Mid-Late 20th century CE)

Christina Yambeing – *Annunciation* (1993 CE)

John Collier - *Annunciation* (2000 CE)

He Qi – *Annunciation* (2001 CE)

Christina Saj – *Annunciation* (ca. 2000 CE)

Figure 1: Study Image No. 1
P. & J. LIMBOURG – Annunciation (ca. 1405 -1409)

Figure 1 is a painting of the Annunciation from a private devotional book, the *'Belles Heures'* or Beautiful Hours, created in France between 1405 and 1408 (Alphonso, 2015). The purpose of this and similar European medieval Christian images was to inspire viewers to prayer and meditation (Cook, 2005).

This depiction of the Annunciation sits within a highly decorative border that displays references to everyday medieval life, a characteristic of Christian art of the period (Cook, 2005). The border is colourful and richly patterned, with heraldic shields, musicians, animals, plants and biblical figures. During this

period of Christian history, artistic expression was held in high regard and incorporated into daily life (Goldburg, 2006). Medieval art and daily living were closely bound to religious expression as the combination of everyday scenes and biblical subjects in this work demonstrates.

In this painting Mary and the angel meet in an interior setting, a characteristic feature of depictions of the Annunciation from the 15th century onwards in Western Christian art, which was intended to suggest qualities of beauty and grace for Mary rather than majesty (Schiller, 1971). There appears to be little emotional connection between Mary and Gabriel as their arms are held close to their bodies and there is no eye contact.

A range of iconographic conventions readily identifies the key figure of Mary. She is depicted in a blue robe, symbolic of her heavenly or spiritual qualities (Boss, 2008; McCarthy, 2011). Her posture is also symbolic as she kneels with eyes downcast, arms folded, inclining her head to listen to the angel's message. This posture suggests her humility and acceptance of God's will (Schiller, 1971). Beside her is a model of a church, inferring the close relationship between Mary and the body of the Church (Schiller, 1971). Inside the model are two books, which could be scriptural texts to highlight the importance of the Word of God to Mary. A white dove rests over Mary's head, representing the Holy Spirit - the power of God's love - that will come upon her (Boss, 2008; Fletcher, 2012; McCarthy, 2011).

The figure of the angel is also recognisable through a variety of iconographic conventions. He has obvious wings and is robed in white to indicate his transcendent nature (Fletcher, 2012; McCarthy, 2011). He is portrayed in a kneeling posture that indicates reverence to Mary, and bears a gift of white lilies that symbolise Mary's purity (Apostolos-Cappadona, 1995; Boss, 2008). Another key feature of the artwork is the figure of God the Father looking down on Gabriel and Mary from a heavenly balcony. The totality of the iconographic features of this Medieval artwork is intended to draw the viewer into prayerful contemplation of the Annunciation event (O'Kane, 2008; Woods, 2012).

Figure 2: Study Image No. 2
TATIANA GRANT - Icon of the Annunciation (late 20th cent.)

This image is a conventional Eastern icon of the Annunciation from the Saint Elias Orthodox Church, Austin, Texas. Whilst a contemporary painting, it demonstrates the standardised style and subject matter of iconography that developed in the Eastern Church from the 5th century onwards (Carroll & Jacqueline, 2010; Schiller, 1971). The conventional portrayal is intended to teach the significance of this scriptural event, and invite worshippers to contemplation and interaction with the transcendent (Jensen, 2011; O'Callaghan, 2008).

In this traditional icon of the Annunciation, Mary meets the angel outdoors. Behind them is a basilica-like building that intimates Mary's Christian faith and her important relationship with the Church (McCarthy, 2011; Schiller, 1971). The portrayal uses customarily strong colours, with a lustrous gold background, halos and highlighting as a symbolic reminder of God's presence (McCarthy, 2011).

In this icon the angel is portrayed hurrying to share the good news with Mary. His right hand is raised as a greeting and blessing (Apostolos-Cappadona, 1995) and he holds a staff, which is symbolic of his role as God's messenger (Schiller, 1971). He has a golden halo or nimbus, symbolic of God's light, to signify his spiritual import (Apostolos-Cappadona, 1995; McCarthy, 2011). The presence of wings on the figure of the angel is similar to the iconography of the Western church, but the colours of his robes are different - blue for heaven and red for divine love, rather than white for transcendence (McCarthy, 2011).

Mary sits on a raised seat, indicating her elevated status as Theotokos, or Mother of God, a title bestowed upon her in the 5th century (Loverance, 2007). She wears a purple robe, a royal colour symbolic of her eminence as Queen of Heaven (McCarthy, 2011). Like the angel she has a golden halo to symbolise her consequence and favour with God. Mary's head is inclined towards the angel as she listens, and her open hand is raised to show that she accepts God's will (Schiller, 1971). In this hand she holds a skein of wool, a reference to an apocryphal text from the 2nd century that recounts how Mary was spinning wool for a new temple curtain when the angel appeared to her (Apostolos-Cappadona, 1995; Schiller, 1971).

A final feature of the traditional Eastern iconography of this Annunciation image is seen at the top of the painting. A segment of a blue circle is visible, symbolising God's infinite nature (McCarthy, 2011). Extending from this towards the figure of Mary are rays representing the Holy Spirit descending with God's Word. In combination with the rest of the iconography of this artwork, the depiction offers the Orthodox worshipper a means of deeper engagement with the subject of the Annunciation during prayer and liturgical celebration.

Figure 3: Study Image No.3
FRA ANGELICO - Annunciation (1433- 1434)

This is one of a number of Annunciation paintings created by Dominican friar, Fra Angelico. It was originally part of an altarpiece in the Church of Gesu, Cortona. The image reflects the substantial iconographic traditions of Christian painting in the Renaissance period. The setting is an open Italian porch or loggia, with the figures of Mary and the angel framed by arches, and separated from each other by a column (Fletcher, 2012). The splendid colour and decoration of the clothing, the haloes, the angel's wings and the architectural fixtures, are all intended to show worshippers the glory of God (McCarthy, 2011; Schiller, 1971).

The Christian symbolism of Fra Angelico's depiction of the Annunciation would be familiar and readily comprehended by viewers of the Renaissance period. Mary is symbolically robed in the Renaissance Marian colour scheme of

red and blue. The red denotes her human attributes such as compassion, while the blue signifies her spiritual or heavenly qualities (Apostolos-Cappadona, 1995; Boss, 2008). Mary looks at the angel as he speaks to her, with her head inclined to indicate her acceptance of God's will (Schiller, 1971). Her seated posture, with hands folded over her breast, further expresses her humility and submission. An open book rests on Mary's lap, suggesting her wisdom and prayerful contemplation of scripture (Apostolos-Cappadona, 1995; McCarthy, 2011).

The richly garmented figure of the angel also displays distinctive iconography. Gabriel is stepping toward Mary with one hand raised in greeting and blessing (Apostolos-Cappadona, 1995). Lines of golden text, like threads drawing the figures closer together, represent the verbal exchange between the angel and Mary. The visible nature of the words indicates their authority from God (Schiller, 1971). The extensive use of gold in the picture suffuses Mary and Gabriel's meeting with light, symbolising the light of faith that proceeds from Mary at the Annunciation event (Fletcher, 2012; McCarthy, 2011).

The brightness around Mary and the angel is in contrast to the darkened background of the image. This dark area shows a depiction of Adam and Eve being expelled from the Garden of Eden. The inclusion of this Old Testament scene infers that Christ's birth will redeem all humankind, bringing people out of the darkness of original sin and into the light of Christian faith (Schiller, 1971).

A final feature of note is the symbolic inclusion of the Trinity. Jesus is present as the Word Incarnate in Mary (Dillenberger, 1996). God the Father is depicted at the top of a column, enclosed within a circle, a symbol of infinity (McCarthy, 2011). The Holy Spirit is present in the form of a dove sent by God as he gazes down upon the meeting of Mary and Gabriel, symbolically emphasising that Mary's conception is through God's Word (Boss, 2008; Fletcher, 2012; Schiller, 1971). The overall religious significance of this Renaissance image is consistently conveyed through its iconographic conventions.

Figure 4: Study Image No. 4
FRA FILIPPO LIPPI - Annunciation with Kneeling Donors (ca. 1440)

Carmelite friar Fra Filippo Lippi painted this early Renaissance work portraying the Annunciation event in an interior setting, similar to the architecture of the time. Features such as the bed on a raised platform and the landscape seen through the window would have been familiar to Renaissance viewers and were intended to encourage them to enter the painting's reality (Schiller, 1971).

The principal focus of the composition is the figure of Mary. She is centrally framed by two sets of columns and an archway. She wears a blue robe over a red dress – the characteristic Marian colour scheme of the Renaissance

(Boss, 2008). The dominant blue robe signifies Mary's heavenly or spiritual qualities, while the red beneath denotes her human traits such as kindness and compassion (Apostolos-Cappadona, 1995; McCarthy, 2011). An open book rests on the shelf beside Mary - an iconographic feature that began in the 11th century to indicate Mary's insight or prayerful contemplation of God's Word (Boss, 2008; Fletcher, 2012; Schiller, 1971). Mary's posture and expression further suggest an inward focus on the significance of the angel's news. At the same time, one of her hands is reaching to accept a white lily from the angel, a symbol of purity and love (Apostolos-Cappadona, 1995; McCarthy, 2011). Mary's reception of the angel's gift denotes her acceptance of God's will (Schiller, 1971).

The reverent kneeling posture of the angel in this painting acknowledges the Church's adoration of Mary as the Mother of God (Apostolos-Cappadona, 1995; Boss, 2008). The angel, like Mary, looks young and is dressed in comfortable rather than elaborate attire. The iconography, whilst clearly identifying the figure of the angel by his wings and gift of a lily to Mary, appears to be striving for a more earthly than celestial rendering of God's messenger. The Holy Spirit can be seen above the angel, descending towards Mary in the form of a dove, to indicate that the moment of her conception is imminent (Boss, 2008; Schiller, 1971).

Some explanation is required to understand why there are two onlookers in the picture. These two figures, who kneel reverently behind a small wall observing the meeting between Mary and the angel, are most likely the donors who commissioned the artwork. The inclusion of patrons in a religious scene was a common feature of Renaissance artworks (Apostolos-Cappadona, 1995).

Figure 5: Study Image No. 5
RICHARD FRANKLIN - Annunciation IV (ca. 1990)

This depiction of the Annunciation is a contemporary painting that emulates the style of a Renaissance fresco. The artist, Richard Franklin, sought to apprehend the essence of 16th century Italian Renaissance artists such as Michelangelo and Titian in his work (Galleria Silecchia, 2015). In particular, he aimed to replicate the characteristic colours, human forms and dynamic compositions of the Renaissance.

This painting displays a number of the iconographic conventions of Annunciation images. The figure of Mary can be readily identified by her blue robe, a colour traditionally used in Renaissance art to signify her heavenly qualities (Apostolos-Cappadona, 1995; Boss, 2008; McCarthy, 2011). She inclines her head towards the angel with eyes downcast indicating humility and acceptance of God's message (Schiller, 1971). At the same time her body is half turned away, perhaps to convey her fear and confusion.

The angel in this painting has a very feminine form in keeping with Renaissance portrayals, which often depicted angels as woman, attired in clothing of the time (Apostolos-Cappadona, 1995). Gabriel reaches across the column that separates the two figures, reducing the distance between them to express a more intensive connection (Schiller, 1971). The figures are almost like partners in a dance. The angel's other arm is raised with a finger pointing heavenward, to emphasise the authority of the message from God (Schiller, 1971).

The meeting of Mary and the angel in Franklin's representation takes place near a building, perhaps on an open veranda. The use of a veranda or colonnade in Annunciation images can indicate either openness or seclusion (McCarthy, 2011). The figures occupy the architectural space created by three columns, their bodies in dynamic movement, in contrast to the immobility of the building. The darkened window openings behind the figures contrast with the well-lit area of Mary and Gabriel's meeting, a juxtaposition that generally denotes humanity's passage from the darkness of original sin into the light of redemption through God's gift of His Son (Fletcher, 2012).

Overall, the iconography of this image, whilst created in the 20th century, stays true to the forms and techniques of the Renaissance, employing a naturalistic style with a classical sense of balanced composition (Apostolos-Cappadona, 1995).

Figure 6: Study Image No. 6
PETER PAUL RUBENS - Annunciation (1609-10)

This depiction of the Annunciation is an early 17th century painting by Flemish Baroque artist Peter Paul Rubens. The work is typical of the historical period with a dramatic use of colour, light, movement and gesture to highlight spiritual significance (Cook, 2005; Loverance, 2007). The crucial focus of the image is the interaction between the figures of Mary and the angel. While the room remains mostly in shadow, the figures are suffused with golden light to symbolise their faith (Fletcher, 2012).

The figure of Mary is clothed with blue over white, a typical Marian colour scheme of 17th century iconography. The use of these colours is a symbolic reference to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Mary (Boss, 2008). Mary appears to be withdrawing in surprise from the angel with one hand raised in a gesture of astonishment (Schiller, 1971). Her gaze however is quite self-possessed as she maintains direct eye contact with the angel and intensifies the exchange. Mary's other hand rests on an open book, which is likely to be the scriptural prophecy from Isaiah 7:14, "The Lord will give you a sign in any case: It is this: the young woman is with child and will give birth to a son whom she will call Immanuel" (Boss, 2008; Fletcher, 2012: Schiller, 1971).

The angel Gabriel is kneeling reverently, gazing up at Mary, his posture and expression acknowledging Mary's unique role as the Mother of God (Apostolos-Cappadona, 1995; Boss, 2008). The angel's wings are almost obscured by a vivid orange shawl billowing out, the movement implying perhaps that he has just arrived. The angel has a hand outstretched towards Mary indicating that he is addressing her (Schiller, 1971).

Above the figures of Mary and the angel, the realm of heaven is intimated by golden light and the presence of a number of cherubim. The Holy Spirit, symbolised in the form of a dove, hovers over a veil of clouds, another symbol of heaven (Boss, 2008; Schiller, 1971). The rays of light that extend from this area towards the figure of Mary signify the path that God's Word will follow as she accepts the role given to her (Schiller, 1971). The artist's deliberate use of areas of light and strong colours produces an image full of movement and energy. This aspect, along with the other iconographic features, was intended to convey a strong emotional message to viewers (Loverance, 2007).
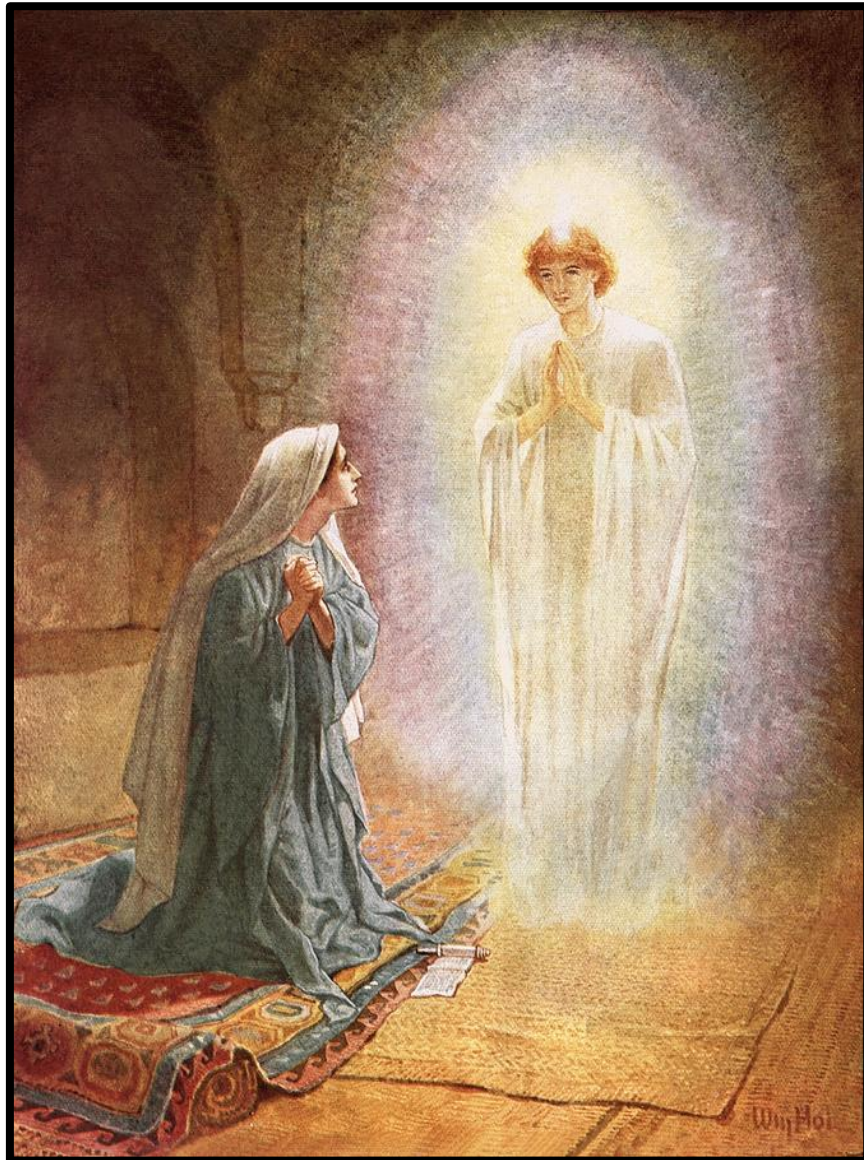
Figure 7: Study Image No. 7
WILLIAM BRASSEY HOLE - Annunciation (ca. 1890)

This depiction of the Annunciation by William Brassey Hole was painted at the end of the 19th century. At that time iconographic themes in Christian art were increasingly influenced by personal rather than ecclesial vision (Loverance, 2007; McLeish, 1993). The earlier consideration for narrative power that was foremost in Western biblical representations gave ground to individual expressions of religion (Cook, 2005). Nonetheless, many references to traditional iconography can be found in this artwork.

The furnishings of the room are simple. The focus is on the figures that dominate the composition. The most striking feature of the image is the brilliant field of light surrounding the angel, which denotes his celestial nature (Fletcher, 2012). The radiating beams give a sense of transcendent energy that draw the viewer into the luminous moment. The angel's long white robes symbolically reiterate his heavenly nature (Fletcher, 2012; McCarthy, 2011). The angel's eyes are intently focused on the figure of Mary. His hands are clasped together in an attitude of prayer and reverence that acknowledges Mary's role as Mother of God (Boss, 2008).

The angel's radiance is reflected off Mary's face. The light that suffuses Mary and the angel's meeting is a symbol of the light of Christian faith (Fletcher, 2012). Mary is portrayed in robes with a traditional blue and white colour scheme that suggests her heavenly qualities and grace in God's sight (Boss, 2008; McCarthy, 2011). She is kneeling, her hands clasped together, in a posture that suggests she is listening to the angel but is perhaps a bit bewildered by the news (Schiller, 1971). The combination of her simple attire and prayerful pose indicate her humility. There is a scroll unfurled on the floor beside her, intimating that she had been reading the Jewish scriptures when the angel appeared (Boss, 2008; Schiller, 1971). The inclusion of a scroll, inscribed with scriptural text was characteristic of the iconography of Medieval and Renaissance art (Apostolos-Cappadona, 1995).

Overall, the subject matter of Hole's representation of the Annunciation is representative of the historical period in which it was created. It was largely intended to serve artistic and personal purposes rather than to be placed in a church setting (Cook, 2005). The nature of its Christian iconography, whilst less prescriptive than in former periods of history, is however clearly referenced to some earlier conventions.

Figure 8: Study Image No. 8
NICOLAS GHIKA– Annunciation (mid-late 20th C)

This 20th century painting of the Annunciation by Nicolas Ghika has some of the two-dimensional qualities of an Orthodox icon, consistent with the artist's Greek heritage. It was produced at a time when the global Christian church was advocating the acceptance of local liturgical and artistic expression in order to reflect a community's cultural heritage (Loverance, 2007).

Ghika's Annunciation, which suggests an interior setting, also recalls aspects of Western Medieval and Renaissance iconography. The figure of Mary is kneeling with her eyes downcast in prayerful contemplation of a text or parchment, presumably scriptural. This posture and activity symbolises her virtue and wisdom (Schiller, 1971). She wears a blue cloak, a colour that infers

her spiritual nature (Boss, 2008; Fletcher, 2012; McCarthy, 2011). She also has a halo that indicates God's presence is with her (McCarthy, 2011). Mary's simple attire and kneeling pose are suggestive of her humility (Schiller, 1971). In her hand is a white flower, recalling the white lily that symbolises either her virtue, or God's abundant love in choosing her (Apostolos-Cappadona, 1995; Fletcher, 2012).

The figure of the angel is in white, the traditional colour to symbolise Gabriel's transcendent nature (Fletcher, 2012; McCarthy, 2011). Like Mary, he has a halo implying his sacredness or nearness to God (Apostolos-Cappadona, 1995). Gabriel also has wings that mark him out as a divine messenger (McCarthy, 2011). The angel seems to hover over Mary, looking down while she is reading and praying. There appears to be little demonstrative connection between Mary and Gabriel - their arms are held close to their bodies and there is no eye contact.

Overall the simplicity of the image suggests that its purpose is to inspire spiritual contemplation rather than to instruct on the narrative. In this respect, the artwork recalls an Eastern icon that presents a scriptural event for meditation (O'Callaghan, 2008). The sober colouring contributes a feeling of sincerity and deliberation to the portrayal, inviting the viewer to sit quietly with the image.
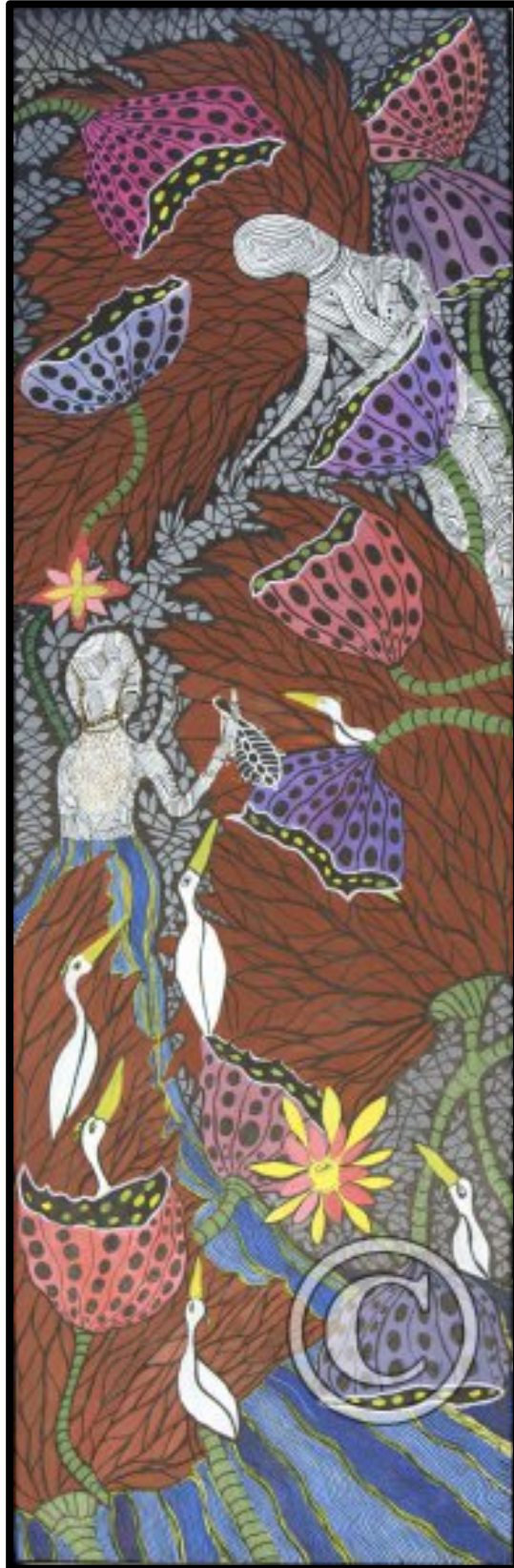
Figure 9: Study Image No. 10
CHRISTINA YAMBEING – Annunciation (1993)

Australian Indigenous artist Christina Yambeing painted this Annunciation image for Christ Church Cathedral, Darwin. The patterns created by shapes, lines and colourful flower motifs generate continuous movement within the work and reflect the natural environment of Northern Australia. The iconography reflects the Australian Indigenous heritage of the work, while at the same time continuing some of the long-standing symbolism of Christianity.

The iconographic convention of clothing Gabriel in white to indicate his transcendent nature (Fletcher, 2012; McCarthy, 2011) suggests that the figure toward the top of the painting – perhaps descending from the realm of heaven - is most likely the angel. This figure has arms outstretched and seems to be reaching down to the figure below, a gesture traditionally indicating the angel's greeting or blessing to Mary (Apostolos-Cappadona, 1995; Schiller, 1971).

The iconographic tradition of representing Mary in blue clothing signifies the figure lower down in the image as Mary (Boss, 2008; Fletcher, 2012; McCarthy, 2011). Her blue dress seems to flow down to become a river. She is not so much a figure in the landscape, but rather part of the landscape. Mary's head is turned towards the angel, with her hands raised in a gesture that symbolises astonishment (Schiller, 1971). Mary and the angel's extended arms, along with the patterned area that runs behind the figures, serves to reduce the distance between them and create a more intensive connection (Schiller, 1971).

The two figures are embedded in the landscape, visually connected with the plants, animals, water and earth. There is a profusion of flowers and birds in the surrounding environment, intimating God's abundance (McCarthy, 2011). The overall mood is generative and joyful. Yambeing reflects on her connection with the land as inspiration for this and other scripturally based works she has created: "Some of us … have been born in the bush, maybe under the open sky with the stars shining above, maybe with only a bough shelter to keep off the sun and the rain. So it is that, in different ways, we have given our own thoughts to the birth of Christ" (Yambeing, n.d.).
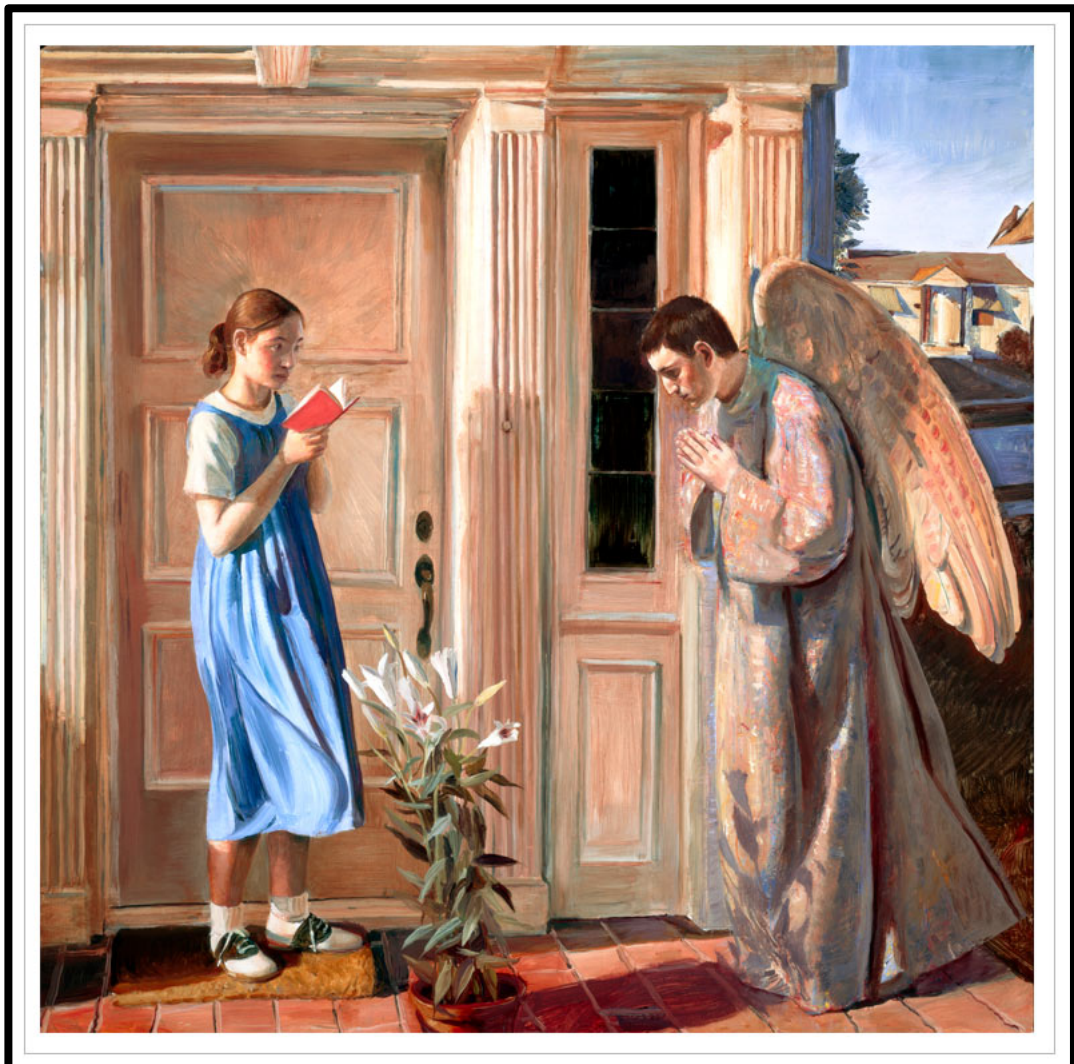
Figure 10: Study Image No. 10
JOHN COLLIER - Annunciation (2000)

John Collier's Annunciation was painted for the Catholic church of St Gabriel's, in McKinney, Texas. It depicts a contemporary American setting, with Mary and Gabriel's meeting occurring on the doorstep of a modern house. Despite this up-to-date and suburban locale, many aspects of conventional Christian iconography are visible.

Collier (2010) explains his choice of a contemporary setting as a feature that is intended to bring viewers emotionally closer, so they more readily identify with the figures in the painting. This is in keeping with the way that settings in

Christian iconography have continued to vary over time to reflect the needs and culture of the worshipping community (Cook, 2005; Miles, 1985).

In this artwork a very young Mary stands in a doorway, a threshold that generally symbolises the gateway between the Old and New Testaments (Schiller, 1971). The artist accentuates Mary's youth by portraying her as a schoolgirl (Collier, 2010). She is still easily identifiable in a blue and white dress, a typical Marian colour scheme, whereby the blue denotes her heavenly qualities and the white is symbolic of her Immaculate Conception (Boss, 2008; McCarthy, 2011).

Mary is interrupted while engrossed in a book, recalling the tradition that began in the Medieval period, of depicting her reading scripture (Apostolos-Cappadona, 1995). This depiction both indicates Mary's wisdom and piety, and offers a role model for others (Boss, 2008; Fletcher, 2012; Schiller, 1971). A white lily is placed close to Mary, symbolising her virtuous nature and dedication to God (Boss, 2008; Fletcher, 2012; McCarthy, 2011).

The figure of the angel Gabriel stands in front of Mary, his large wings signifying his role as a heavenly messenger (Apostolos-Cappadona, 1995; McCarthy, 2011). The angel's head is bowed towards Mary and his hands are held together in a gesture of reverent greeting (Boss, 2008). He appears to be waiting for her reply. Also waiting in the background on the roof of a neighbouring house is a small dove, symbolising the Holy Spirit (Collier, 2010; Fletcher, 2012; Schiller, 1971). Whilst the dove is less prominent than in Annunciation works from earlier historical periods, it is a symbol to help viewers access the painting's Christian meaning (Collier, 2010).

Figure 11: Study Image No. 11
HE QI – Annunciation (2001)

He Qi's contemporary depiction of the Annunciation, which has flat planes of strong colour and heavy black outlines, is reminiscent of stained glass. There is not a lot of detail to contextualize the depiction and the setting is not completely evident. The figures of Mary and the angel appear to be meeting through a window, which suggests that Mary is inside a room. Despite the scarcity of detail in the image there is still a range of traditional iconographic features that help to interpret the painting.

Mary's blue-purple dress recalls the symbolic use of blue for her clothing, which can be traced back to Renaissance Christian iconography (Boss, 2008). This colour represents her heavenly qualities (Apostolos-Cappadona, 1995). Mary's kneeling posture in this picture suggests an inner quality of tranquillity. Mary is playing a flute – a contemplative activity reminiscent of the prayerful pose of Mary in many Annunciation paintings that symbolised her wisdom and piety (Boss, 2008; Fletcher, 2012; Schiller, 1971). The candle burning beside her is a symbol of faithfulness to God (Fletcher, 2012). The white lilies in front of Mary are a traditional indication of her virtue (Boss, 2008; Fletcher, 2012; McCarthy, 2011). Mary's gaze is fixed on the angel with an expression that is hard to identify. She is focused but her facial expression does not convey an obvious emotion.

Gabriel is clothed in white, with a halo and wings, iconographic features that make the figure immediately recognisable as a heavenly messenger (Apostolos-Cappadona, 1995; Fletcher, 2012; McCarthy, 2011). The angel looks directly at Mary with a finger raised to indicate he is addressing her with a message of significance (Schiller, 1971). The raised finger is pointing heavenwards which could be intended to infer that God is the author of the message conveyed by the angel. A strong light suffuses the area around the angel, further highlighting Gabriel's transcendent nature (Fletcher, 2012).

A final feature of the traditional Christian iconography is the white dove poised in the golden light between the two figures. The dove represents the Holy Spirit sent by God the Father (Boss, 2008; Fletcher, 2012; Schiller, 1971). Overall, He Qi's depiction of the Annunciation, which uses contemporary forms and reflects aspects of the artist's personal expression, also displays many properties of traditional Christian iconography.
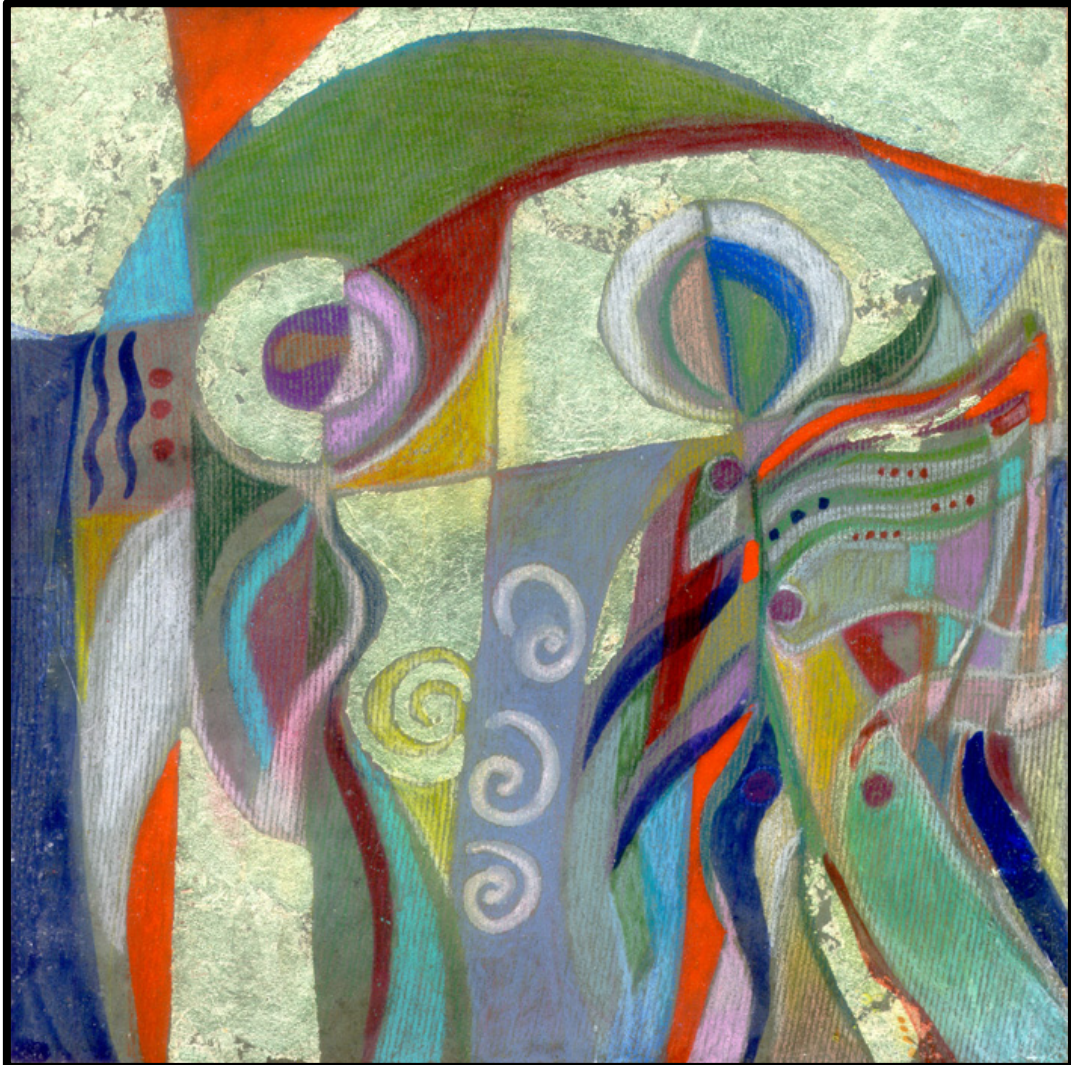
Figure 12: Study Image No. 12
CHRISTINA SAJ – Annunciation (ca. 2000)

Christina Saj's artworks symbolically explore Christian scriptural themes for contemporary contexts (International Marian Research Institute, 2015). Her artwork demonstrates her interest in colour and form rather than traditional narrative depiction, a characteristic of many Christian artworks from the 20th century onwards (Loverance, 2007).

This depiction of the Annunciation displays elements of both abstract and figurative representation. Lines and planes of colour fill the image, converging and overlapping to suggest two figures. These figures, however, have no faces

and without knowledge of the subject matter it would be hard to distinguish them as Mary and the angel. The intersecting planes of colour around the figures could suggest an architectural structure but there is no definition or sense of perspective to determine a specific setting.

Each of the figures in the image is composed of multiple lines and shapes. The figures balance each other in terms of composition. The heads, whilst having no facial features, appear to be turned towards each other. There is a connection created between them but the nature of their exchange is not clear. The figure on the right has a suggestion of wings and motion, and could therefore be interpreted as the angel. The figure on the left is simpler and appears to be standing still. It is composed of a few curved forms that could indicate a young woman. An understanding of this Annunciation artwork cannot take cues from traditional Christian iconography. The subject matter is unclear, meaning that viewers would instead have to take other interpretative paths such as colour and expressionism to form an understanding of the work.

2.5 Summary of Chapter Two

A range of literature has been reviewed in this chapter to develop relevant background information to explore the nature of children's understanding arising from encounters with Christian artworks. The review has developed a broad perspective on the process of visual meaning making, as well as giving specific attention to interpreting Christian artworks.

The literature reveals that visual understanding is a dynamic and complex activity, which varies according to context and purpose (Walsh, 2006). Viewers bring prior experience and understanding to visual encounters that influence their interpretation of images (Frei, 1999). Visual art encounters are holistic, offering sensory and conceptual challenges as well as affective engagement (Alter, 2009).

Practical studies indicate that understanding artworks is a developmental process of gradually increasing complexity (Parsons, 1987). In other words, a person's ability to make sense of artworks increases with age and experience from an initial self-centred stance, through to an appreciation of both subjective and objective perspectives of visual meaning making (Freeman, 2010). As aesthetic development progresses individuals acquire insights into aesthetic topics that give increasing perception to art interpretation (Parsons, 1987).

The literature demonstrates that understanding Christian art involves constructing meaning from Christian iconography or subject matter, which makes possible a deeper level of interpretation of the meaning of an artwork (Apostolos-Cappadona, 1995). A focus on the iconography of selected depictions of the biblical narrative of the Annunciation to Mary has illustrated some of the iconographic conventions and symbolic meanings of Christian art.

The totality of the body of literature reviewed in this chapter provides a theoretical basis from which the practical exploration of children's interpretations of Christian visual artworks can be properly conducted. The ensuing chapter will continue to structure the theoretical foundation of the study by presenting the conceptual framework and methodology.

CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter presented a range of literature as background to this study of the understandings that children demonstrate in encounters with Christian art. The literature indicates that the process of interpreting artworks or visual meaning making, is a dynamic and complex activity that can be influenced by the viewer's context, prior knowledge and viewing purpose (Cochrane, 2014; Piro, 2002; Plate, 2002). Practical studies show that the ability to understand artworks is also a process of gradually increasing complexity, with maturity and experience resulting in increasingly complex interpretations of visual meaning (Freeman, 2008; Parsons, 1987).

At a more specific level, the literature reveals that the process of understanding Christian artworks involves a particular course of interpretation, which is interpreting a religious message or meaning from the Christian subject matter of the artwork. Christian subject matter has many distinctive symbolic or iconographic conventions that can offer a deeper level of spiritual meaning to viewers (Brown, 2008; McCarthy, 2011). The final level of specificity in the previous chapter was a focus on the interpretation of paintings of the scriptural account of the Annunciation to Mary (Luke 1:26-38). The discussion of Annunciation artworks selected for the study illustrates the variety of symbolic traditions in Christian visual art. Overall, the previous chapter demonstrates that understanding Christian artworks involves awareness of how to interpret images, as well as how to interpret the iconographic conventions of Christian subject matter.

The theoretical framework and methodology of the study have been developed in light of the issues arising from the literature review. This chapter is organised into three sections: the justification for the theoretical framework; the ethics of researching with children; and the research procedures.

3.2 Justification of the theoretical framework

The theory that underpins and guides any research can be envisaged at a number of levels (Schram, 2006). In order for these components to provide a well-structured theoretical framework they must form a coherent viewpoint or paradigm that appropriately informs the research problem. In other words, the theoretical framework provides a conceptual scaffold through which the issue can be examined, and it will inform all elements of the research design in a particular way.

Interpretivist paradigm

The theoretical perspective of Interpretivism best represents the way in which this study is conceptually positioned. Aligning the research standpoint with an Interpretivist paradigm acknowledges my belief that reality is "constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting" (Crotty, 1998, p. 43). From this position, the Catholic school setting of the study is understood as an environment with a particular sociocultural viewpoint incorporating "culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world" (Crotty, 1998, p. 67). In other words, the research framework acknowledges my belief that the particular sociocultural setting will contribute to participants' concepts of reality and knowledge.

The nature of the research, which involves exploring children's understanding or construction of meanings from Christian artworks, involves apprehension of individual participant perspectives. This requirement recommends the use of an interpretive conceptual framework that will accept the world as understood and assigned significance by individual perception and cognition (Basit, 2010; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011; Waring, 2012). From this Interpretivist viewpoint, children's interpretation of Christian artworks is recognised as an ongoing process of personal meaning making.

Overall then the paradigm of Interpretivism informs the way in which this exploration is both envisaged and conducted. This positioning accepts that the way in which the study is enacted is influenced by the researcher's sociocultural viewpoints, background and life experiences. Whilst acknowledging the inevitably of this impact, the research design bears in mind the need to minimise the researcher's effect on the study and to ensure that participant voices are accurately apprehended (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011).

Constructionist epistemology

Within an Interpretive paradigm, epistemological claims or beliefs about knowledge, are based primarily on a Constructionist stance, which holds that knowledge of the world is contingent on interaction with it, and is fundamentally shaped within social context (Basit, 2010; Waring, 2012). Adopting this epistemological stance for the study acknowledges that participants' understandings of Christian artworks are likely to be influenced by their individual background and life experience.

A Catholic school is a particular sociocultural context in which a Catholic viewpoint of the world is articulated through stories, beliefs and traditions (Bishops of NSW and the ACT, 2007). Students in Catholic schools are encouraged to interact with the world in ways that reflect this religious perspective. They engage with a religious education curriculum that gives them experience of Christian stories. This situated knowledge of the world will likely influence the way in which they attribute meaning to things in the world such as Christian artworks, and as such fits with the Constructionist theoretical framing.

A Constructionist research stance aims to encompass awareness of contextualised understanding, both on the part of the participants, and of the researcher (Crotty, 1998). Constructionism accepts variation in historical and cultural interpretations of phenomena and therefore provides relevant positioning for a study involving Christian artworks, the nature of which have changed over time to reflect varying historical and cultural expressions of Christianity (Hornik & Parsons, 2006; McLeish, 1993; Viladesau, 2000).

A Constructionist standpoint is further justified in this study due to the educational nature of the problem and the setting. Constructionism is one perspective commonly found within educational contexts, where contemporary pedagogical practice recognises that the social and cultural context of a learner will predispose them to construct meaning in particular ways (Barnes, 2008; Catholic Education, Diocese of Parramatta, 2010).

The consequence of a Constructionist perspective is that knowledge about social phenomena – in this instance, students' interpretation of Christian artworks – may be ascertained through an exploration of the perceptions of participants (Creswell, as cited in Basit, 2010). Participants' descriptions and explanations of Christian artworks will indicate how they attribute meaning to these artefacts. Whilst this meaning is likely to be constructed by a process of individual interpretation, it is also likely to reflect common elements, as a result of the shared religious outlook of the Catholic sociocultural setting.

Symbolic Interactionist approach

Within an Interpretivist research paradigm a Constructionist perspective on knowledge can be expressed in a variety of ways. The particular expression of Interpretivism that offers the most suitable lens for exploring primary school children's understanding of Christian artworks within a Catholic context is Symbolic Interactionism – a theoretical approach that investigates the meanings that people learn and assign to their experiences against their backgrounds of culture and community (Crotty, 1998; Given, 2008).

Each culture has a set of symbols that members receive, comprehend and use, consciously or otherwise (Crotty, 1998). The traditional iconography of Christian artworks can be readily understood in Symbolic Interactionist terms. The subject matter of these images presents Christian scripture, beliefs and traditions in a symbolic form. In other words, Christian iconography uses particular symbols that have been assigned communal meanings to express Christian understandings about the world.

A foundational belief of Symbolic Interactionist theory is that human behaviour reflects the meaning that people give to phenomena. Understanding of a particular phenomenon and resulting activity is constantly "constructed and reconstructed on the basis of people's interpretations of the situation they are in" (Punch, 2009, p. 125). A significant methodological implication of this is that researchers should seek to view phenomena from the viewpoint of participants and remain open to diverse constructions of meaning (Crotty, 1998).

Qualitative methodology

The problem at the centre of this research - children's understanding of Christian artworks – requires a methodology that acknowledges the exploratory nature of the study. The literature offers limited information about this phenomenon so it is imperative to learn more through engaging directly with participants. These requirements necessitate a qualitative methodology, which is characterised by exploration of a phenomenon in order to gain deeper understanding (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011; Creswell, 2012).

Qualitative methodologies allow for interactive and hermeneutical investigation processes (Creswell, 2012). They take the researcher into the social environment, interacting with participants in order to apprehend a phenomenon through participant perspectives (Basit, 2010). Qualitative methodologies give credence to children's viewpoints and have a recognised history in social and educational research (Basit, 2010; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011; Creswell, 2012; Waring, 2012).

Another significant characteristic of qualitative methodologies is the focus on participant expression as the means of exploring their meaning-making activities (O'Donoghue, 2007). This capacity to acknowledge participant voice is important within educational contexts as it appropriately acknowledges and respects the agency of children as learners (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). Regard for individual meaning making is also consistent with an appreciation of the Catholic Church's respect for the individual in education, and for the

expression of its mission in specific cultural contexts (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977; Second Vatican Council, 1965).

Whilst there is no fixed design for a qualitative study there are common methodological characteristics such as data gathering via observations and interviews (Bhatti, 2012; Punch, 2009). These methods help preserve the participants' viewpoints through first-hand accounts that minimise researcher subjectivity. Other qualitative characteristics that have been incorporated in this study are: centrality of fieldwork; use of a relatively low number of participants; sensitivity to participants' perspectives; direct reporting of participant voice; flexibility in research focus in response to field experience; and an openness to researcher reflexivity.

3.3 Ethics of research with children

Ethical considerations are central in research design, and attention to ethical standards is required in all phases of research (Creswell, 2012). The position of a researcher is built on trust and often involves privileged access to information, and as such, research should be "conducted with integrity and respect for the rights and interests of participants" (Australian Catholic University, 2015).

Ethical principles

Research involving children needs to be mindful of four key ethical values - autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence and justice (Craig, Taylor & MacKay, 2013, p. 247). These principles arise from the potential vulnerability of young participants, who may be unable to give fully informed consent. The guidelines of the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (Australian Government, 2007) therefore underpin this research.

The meaning of each principle and the way in which it is addressed in the study is outlined below:

- The principle of **autonomy** highlights the care taken to account for children's ability to freely consent or decline to participate in a research study (Craig, Taylor & MacKay, 2013). Autonomy is facilitated by considered choice of language in

research information in order to make it accessible to children. This principle is addressed in the study by the use of age appropriate language in consent forms and interview procedures.

- The principle of **non-maleficence** obliges the researcher to avoid, as far as possible, causing any physical, psychological or other form of harm to child participants (Craig, Taylor & MacKay, 2013). This is addressed in the study by interacting with children in a respectful and affirming manner, ensuring that the duration of interviews are reasonable, and remaining alert and responsive to any indications of participant discomfort.

- The principle of **beneficence** demands assurance that benefits to individuals, the community or wider society, outweigh potential risks to participants (Craig, Taylor & MacKay, 2013). In this study there are no anticipated risk to children participating in interviews, while the potential benefits include the wellbeing associated with engaging in discussion with an attentive adult, and enriched religious education learning experiences.

- The principle of **justice** highlights the researcher's responsibility to provide equitable treatment to all participants, including removing any potential bias associated with participant selection (Craig, Taylor & MacKay, 2013). This principle is met in the study by inviting a school executive member to monitor the recruitment process, thereby ensuring potential conflicts of interest are eliminated and that a reliable selection process is applied.

Children as research participants

In addition to being aware of the aforesaid principles, the conduct of research with children requires an ethical concept of children at its foundation. An appropriate understanding for educational research situations is a view of children as "participating subjects with agency" (Sargeant & Harcourt, 2012, p. xii). In other words, children as research participants are recognised as individuals able to encounter the world on their own, albeit with the influence of significant adults such as parents and teachers. It is important that they do not feel compelled to

participate, and that their contributions to research are suitably acknowledged (Richards, 2009b). This positioning accords with the Constructionist perspective adopted in the conceptual framing as it recognises children as capable of authentic and individual knowledge about the world, based on their experience within a particular context.

The research question asked in this study is: '*What understandings do children demonstrate through encounters with Christian artworks?*" This question implicitly assumes that children are capable of meaningful and individual knowledge about the artworks they encounter, as well as incorporating recognition of the worth of each child's perspective. The research question clearly values children as research participants and remains open to their individual understanding of Christian artworks.

Another necessary consideration in the study is that children have individual agency, that is, the capacity to act independently in ways that may diverge from or even conflict with an adult interpretation of a situation (Sargeant & Harcourt, 2012). In honouring children's agency, researchers relinquish complete control of research processes, instead allowing for uncertainty. This is accommodated in this study's data generation by semi-structured interviews, which provide scope for participants to follow their own thinking rather than being constrained by closed questions, and allow for researcher modification as needed (Vidovich, 2003). The child's agency is also respected in the data analysis phase, which seeks to authentically represent all participant interpretations.

Approvals and permissions

In addition to the above-mentioned ethical issues, a range of other concerns were evaluated as part of the research approval process under the guidelines of the Australian Catholic University Human Research Ethics Committee (ACUHREC). These procedures stipulate that consideration is given to significant issues such as informed participant consent, site access permission, participant anonymity, data confidentiality and security, and integrity in reporting research findings. The submission to the ACUHREC (HREC No: 2014 277N), acknowledges that with minor adjustments, these issues are appropriately addressed (see Appendix B).

The slight changes made to the submission were a pertinent reminder of the differentiation between the role of teacher and researcher in a school environment. One adjustment was the provision of an explicit statement of intention to conduct the research in a location that ensures visibility of researcher and child at all times, rather than having this presumed. Another modification involved rewording the consent form to make the language more age-appropriate. These minor changes helped safeguard a high standard of ethical research.

After approval from the ACUHREC, the process of site permission was initiated through a separate submission (See Appendix C) to Catholic Education, Diocese of Parramatta (CEDP). This submission considered the potential benefits and risks of conducting research within the researcher's place of employment. The likely benefits were both methodological and pragmatic. In terms of methodology, an existing knowledge of the cultural characteristics of the setting could facilitate deeper understanding of participant perspectives, while a pragmatic benefit was the greater feasibility of balancing employment and research responsibilities.

Potential conflicts of interest

The main risk in conducting research in a place of employment is potential conflicts of interest between researcher and employee roles, especially during the recruitment phase, as parents, students, or school staff may feel an obligation to be involved in a study. A supplementary consideration is the methodological responsibility for researcher reflexivity. This acknowledgement assists openness in the researcher role, demonstrates respect for the context, and acknowledges the researcher's interpretation of a phenomenon is only one possible perspective (Creswell, 2012).

In this study, discussion with university supervisors and the school executive led to a consensus that a conflict of interest concern be acknowledged and minimised in the study through employing a range of transparent and deliberate strategies to reduce this possibility. Firstly, the information provided to participants clearly outlined both the voluntary nature of participation, and the option to withdraw consent at any time without adverse consequence. The selection process ensured that any current or past students, as well as children of staff members, were removed from the pool of potential participants. The school

executive nominated the classes from which the participants would be drawn, which further reduced possible conflicts of interest.

The submission to the CEDP provided an outline of the study and necessary measures to maintain ethical integrity including: disclosure of the study's purpose to all stakeholders; the voluntary nature of participation; actions to ensure participant anonymity; and respectful acknowledgement of social, cultural and religious dimensions of the context (Basit, 2010; Creswell, 2012; Saltmarsh, 2013). Following CEDP permission, a meeting with the school principal gained approval to implement the research. A School Letter of Explanation was provided to the school executive to clarify the study's purpose and its educational relevance (as per Appendix D). Other essential information proffered included: the anticipated amount of time required for individual interviews; an explication of how the data would be used; and the notion of reciprocity or reward for participation (Creswell, 2012). The totality of these measures provided appropriate safeguards to reduce potential conflicts of interest in the research process.

Roles and Relationships

Upholding ethical researcher-participant relationships requires researchers to preserve confidentiality and represent participant views authentically (Sargeant & Harcourt, 2012). In other words, a relationship of trust needs to be established and upheld so participants can rely on a researcher to value their contributions.

My pre-existing role as a staff member in the school might be argued as a conflicting element in regard to the researcher-participant relationship, particularly if the study dealt with sensitive issues. In this instance, however, the subject matter was not problematic, so my employee role was not considered a significant concern. Rather, participants and parents gained an additional source of information on which to make their decision to accept or decline participation.

The implementation of research can involve establishing a temporary researcher identity to counter the imbalanced rapport that often occurs between children and adults (Richards, 2009a). In the data generation phase of the study my researcher identity is distinguished from my teacher identity by physical cues such as using a non-classroom space within the school, removing indicators such

as a staff badge, and wearing less formal attire. In addition to communicating the distinction to participants through these non-verbal cues, I also use verbal reminders such as introducing myself to participants as a researcher and briefly explaining that role. These physical and verbal signs function not only as prompts for the children, but as reminders to divorce myself from a 'teacher's perspective' and authentically enter the children's views of the world.

A small but nonetheless significant aspect of conducting ethical research is a commitment to honour the notion of reciprocity or reward for participation (Creswell, 2012). Within the culture of the school site, student efforts are often rewarded by affirming words, stickers, certificates or relevant privileges. With the school's approval, the children who participated in this study are acknowledged verbally for their contribution, and given the option of choosing a small reproduction of a Christian artwork as a token of appreciation at the end of the interview. Of the thirteen children interviewed, twelve opt to take an image and most evidence an obvious appreciation for the token, with comments indicating its value such as where they will display it at home. In addition the school received copies of the religious images used in the interview process as teacher resources.

3.4 Research procedures

The overall aim of this study is to explore the understandings that children in a Catholic school setting demonstrate in response to encounters with Christian art. This exploratory purpose necessitates the use of qualitative research procedures to facilitate sharing each participant's frame of reference.

Site and participant selection

The qualitative aim of this study suggests the need for a purposeful sampling technique, with the site and participants being deliberately chosen as those that best afford insights into the central phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). Based on background knowledge of the context and practical considerations such as access and time, the Catholic primary school in which I was employed provided an appropriate research site. This site is located in the Catholic Education Diocese of Parramatta (CEDP) on the outskirts of western Sydney. At the time of the

research approximately 550 students were enrolled from Kindergarten through to Year 6. The school has a largely homogenous population with approximately 4% of students from a language background other than English, and 2% identifying as Indigenous (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander). The school's Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) is 1085, which is moderately above the national average (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2014).

The school students, ranging in age from five to twelve years, are taught in grades according to NSW Board of Studies Teaching and Educational Standards (BOSTES) curriculum. This curriculum outlines sequential content for each domain of learning, taking into account children's cognitive development, needs and interests (BOSTES, 2014). The initial research target was for a multi-age and gender-balanced sample of twelve children, in order to generate a data set that had a degree of representativeness without becoming unwieldy. The multi-age composition would enable sensitivity to suggested age-related changes in children's understanding of visual artworks (Freeman, 2010; Maras, 2008, 2010; Parsons, 1987). The small sample would also allow a detailed and textured depiction of the phenomenon to surface (Creswell, 2012).

As the research project involves students less than 18 years of age, the recruitment proceeds through a number of ethical gatekeepers (Sargeant & Harcourt, 2012). For example, in addition to university and school approval, the study requires both parental consent and participant assent. Additional gatekeepers in the process are the classroom teachers and school executive who nominate classes for sampling.

Participation and consent procedures

Since research within schools can sometimes be perceived as coercive by virtue of the setting (Sargeant and Harcourt, 2012), it is important to give explicit assurance during the recruitment process that there is no obligation to participate in the study, and participants can withdraw at any time. Therefore, the voluntary nature of participation is set out clearly in both the Research Participant Information Letter (as per Appendix E) and the Parent/Guardian Consent Form (as

per Appendix F). This information is also reiterated verbally at each interview.

As previously noted, prior to contacting likely participants from the nominated classes there was consultation with the school principal regarding the potential student pool. This consultation resulted in the exclusion of some potential participants – those who were either past or present students of mine, or were children of staff members. From the adjusted class lists a gender-balanced multi-age sample of 18 randomly selected students were invited to participate in the study. These invitations were distributed by the internal school mail system to ensure confidentiality of participant contact details.

Each invitation to participate contained a Research Participant Information Letter (as per Appendix E) explaining the project, and a Parent/Guardian Consent Form (as per Appendix F) that required both parental/guardian consent and child assent. The researcher's email contact was provided for parents should they require further information. The Research Participant Information Letter addressed both informational and ethical matters including clear disclosure of the purpose and background of the study, and requirements of participating in the study. A key consideration in the decision to participate in a study is information about the data being collected as well as how confidentiality will be preserved (Basit, 2010; Creswell, 2012; Saltmarsh, 2013). This information was provided in language that was concise and accessible, as well as respectful of the school's educational partnership with the parent body.

After a period of a week, six affirmative responses were received. A second round of invitations was distributed, yielding another seven consents, giving a total of 13 respondents and the decision was made to honour all offers. The final sample comprised: four participants aged six years (two boys and two girls); four participants aged nine years (two boys and two girls); and five participants aged eleven years (three boys and two girls).

Data generation

The aim of the study was to explore the understandings that children display in response to encounters with Christian art. Christian artworks are not

regular teaching resources within the study site, so an opportunity was created for participants to encounter some examples. Consideration was given to linking the selected artworks to a biblical story familiar from the Religious Education curriculum, to ensure that all students would have some background knowledge to bring to the artwork encounter. The scripture narrative chosen was the story of the Annunciation to Mary (Luke 1: 26-38), a passage that students engage with each year in a Catholic school as part of Religious Education. Twelve paintings that depict the scriptural narrative of the Annunciation are used for the participant interviews (as per Appendix A).

A Participant Interview Script (as per Appendix G) was devised to scaffold individual interviews about artworks with each participant. The script is modelled on studies of children's art interpretation, and uses neutral questions and prompts consistent with those used by other researchers such as Freeman & Sanger (1995), Parsons (1987), and Maras (2008). The participant responses to these open-ended questions comprise the primary form of data in the study.

The use of open-ended questions is a strategy that corresponds with the Interpretivist paradigm of this study. This stance requires data to be collected from the viewpoint of participants. Individual interviews facilitate interacting authentically with participants, giving opportunity to share their frame of reference and authentically render their interpretations of the world (Crotty, 1998; Richards, 2009b). A semi-structured interview schedule is used to accommodate the need for authentic researcher-participant interaction. The interview structure provides a purposeful scaffold for data generation as well as scope for participants to follow their own thinking (Vidovich, 2003).

Another justification for employing a schedule of open-ended questions is to ensure that the process of data generation is deliberate. A qualitative data gathering strategy should aim to produce the most useful information to answer the research question, while at the same time minimising intrusion to the research site (Lapan, 2012). Individual interviews that adhere to a common script and are conducted separately from the classroom enable a consistent research approach and reduce interruptions to regular classroom operations.

Prior to conducting the interviews a meeting was held with relevant class teachers. It was important that teachers be consulted about the withdrawal of students so they could give consideration to any possible repercussions from a student being absent from class at a particular time. Matters put forward included measures to ensure that participants did not miss any critical class sessions, assessment tasks, or specialist lessons. This consultation was an important aspect in the ethical conduct of the research, along with the need to adhere to time frames and to minimise school disruption.

The practical event of data generation took place over four consecutive days. The individual participant interviews were conducted face-to-face in a school-designated space separate from the classroom. This assisted in minimising disruption to individual, class and school activities. It also helped signal the research interviews as something other than regular school involvement. Each interview followed the same format, taking 20-30 minutes. This time allocation was judged realistic in terms of demands on individual student attention, as well as class routines.

Participant interviews

Each interview commenced with an introduction, an acknowledgement of the student's participation and an assurance that their knowledge was valuable. After an age-appropriate explanation of the interview purpose and format, each participant was asked whether they had any objection to the interview being audio-recorded. The interview then followed the script at Appendix G.

The interview involved presenting participants with a scenario that invited them to choose pictures they thought best to teach other children about the scriptural narrative of the Annunciation to Mary (Luke 1:26-38). In other words, the participant was positioned as the 'expert', and asked to provide assistance to the researcher by identifying the best images to teach the biblical story.

Whilst the overall study sought to explore the nature of children's understandings *through* their encounters with Christian artworks, it was also

important to establish their knowledge of the depicted scriptural event *prior to* their encounters with the artworks. This preliminary inquiry would generate a record of the children's existing understanding of the Annunciation narrative, thus creating a baseline against which their subsequent responses to the artworks could be compared.

After eliciting participants' prior knowledge of the Annunciation narrative (Luke 1:26-38), the scriptural passage was read aloud and displayed on the table. A deliberate choice was made to use the *Contemporary English Bible* version of the scripture passage (see Appendix H). This translation uses more accessible language than other versions and is approved by the Catholic Church for use with children.

The picture selection task was then explained to the participant:
I want you to imagine that you are a teacher and you are trying to teach other children this story of the Annunciation using pictures as well as a Bible. Could you please look at these paintings and choose three that you think would be best or most helpful to teach other children this story?

A set of twelve Annunciation images was spread out on a table in front of the participant (see Appendix A). As the participant considered and selected images they considered the 'best' or 'most helpful', they were prompted to speak about the reasons why they chose or rejected an image. Aesthetic development theories indicate that picture preference is generally influenced by a person's underlying assumptions about visual representations (DeSantis & Housen, 1996; Parsons, 1987). In eliciting reasons for participant preferences it was expected that some of these covert assumptions about artworks would become explicit. In addition to making manifest aspects of children's aesthetic understanding, the interviews sought to bring to light other knowledge domains such as understanding of the Christian iconography of scriptural artworks.

Most of the participants engaged readily with the picture selection task and gave thoughtful consideration to the images. A couple of participants asked for clarification about the age of the children in the teaching scenario. Some

participants picked up individual images to inspect them more closely, while others scanned backwards and forwards across the selection. Several participants moved a few preferred images aside quickly, while for others the selection task took an extended period of time.

In addition to asking why images were selected as 'good', 'best' or 'most helpful' participants were also asked questions to elicit their understanding of what each picture depicted. Questions such as: *What is this picture about;* and *What's happening in this picture?* direct attention to the subject matter of an image and encourage viewers to look for a known subject (Housen, 2007). Further prompts *'What do you see that makes you say that?'* were given to facilitate the children's visual meaning making, and to have them clarify or elaborate on their understanding. On average, each participant articulated their understanding of six or seven images, before ultimately deciding on three images that they felt would best support teaching other children about the Annunciation scripture. At the conclusion of the interview each participant took a photograph of the images they had nominated as the best, and were given the option of choosing a small print as a token of appreciation.

A week after the interviews I met informally with the participants as a group to give them a copy of the photograph of their final artwork selection. This informal meeting provided an opportunity to reiterate my appreciation of their contributions to the research study, as well as a chance for the children to provide feedback on the interview experience and to share their final artwork selections with each other. The discussion about the artwork selections was quite animated as the children acknowledged similarities and differences in their preferences. The children's feedback on the interview experience was thoughtful, with the general consensus being that whilst it was challenging to articulate ideas about artworks, they enjoyed sharing their opinions. These informal exchanges were not recorded or included in the data analysis.

Data analysis

The data generation resulted in thirteen audio interviews of average 25 minutes duration each. The author transcribed each interview in full (See Sample Interview Transcript at Appendix I), assigning each participant an appropriately gendered pseudonym and their age, for example 'Chloe, age 6 years'. Particular conventions were applied to the interview transcripts including insertion of basic sentence punctuation to correspond with short pauses and inflexions in participant's speech. Also included in the transcript are indications of non-verbal elements such as long pauses, gestures, or facial expressions that accompany participants' speech. The participants' hesitations, repetitions, incorrect grammar or idiomatic use of language is retained to ensure the authenticity of the transcript.

The decision to do the transcription rather than outsource the process, was made for pragmatic reasons. Firstly, doing the transcription myself was both expedient and economical. I could commence transcribing immediately, and my knowledge of the context would likely assist the accuracy of transcription. Also important was the fact that transcription afforded first hand experience of a vital component of the research process. At the same time, involvement in the transcription process opened the possibility of researcher subjectivity so was borne in mind whilst transcribing.

The process of transcription involved employing a consistent procedure to transform the audio recording of each interview into written text. The first step was the formation of a draft interview transcript by listening to the recording in segments that corresponded to natural divisions in the conversation, such as a single question and response. After a conversation segment was heard in its entirety it was then replayed in shorter sections as demanded by my typing skills. Partitioning the listening into these conversation segments was important as it allowed the interview to be heard and transcribed as contextualised rather than disconnected verbal information. The draft transcripts were then carefully reviewed and edited through subsequent listening to the audio recordings. The same procedure was applied to the transcription of all audio recordings to ensure accuracy and consistency in the final interview transcripts.

The focus of the subsequent data analysis was guided by the purpose of the study, which was descriptive and exploratory. This purpose meant giving attentiveness to apprehending patterns, themes and categories in the data (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). The data analysis drew on thematic analysis principles, which are concerned with identifying "ideas or concepts that assist in the interpreting or explanation of the data" (Willis, 2013, p. 326). Each analytic theme is therefore made up of a number of related ideas organised around a central concept, which may be predetermined by the literature or emerge from the data (Willis, 2013).

The initial step in the thematic analysis of the data was careful reading and rereading of the interview transcripts to identify recurrent topics in participant responses. Each recurrent topic was assigned a code word or phrase that was either inductively derived from the data (*in vivo* codes), or developed through an understanding of the literature (*a priori* codes) (see Appendix J). The next step in the analysis was to group related codes together into particular themes (see Appendices K & L). A theme should signify "something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represent some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 224). The analysis process continually referred back to the research question to maintain relevance.

The possibility of choosing computer rather than manually coding is an option in qualitative analysis. In weighing up the advantages of each, the practical and theoretical reasons for manual handling of interview data outweighed those of computer coding. Firstly, manual coding offered greater expediency and economy than developing proficiency with a software package. It also offered enhanced sensitivity and flexibility in the development of data themes than electronic coding, which can run the risk of constraining data to computer generated categories (Barbour, 2014; Vidovich, 2003).

As is characteristic of qualitative research, there was a necessary merging of data analysis and interpretation (Barbour, 2014; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). The analysis involved making sense of the data in terms of participant

understandings and authentically reflecting their language and meanings. The process of analysis was necessarily iterative with a tendency to go back and forth interpreting and reinterpreting the data rather than progressing through the analysis in an entirely linear fashion. This repetition can generate greater analytic rigour when looking for ideas relevant to the research question (Barbour, 2014).

The close reading and coding of the transcripts led to the assigning of provisional themes that were revised through further analysis - a necessary feature of thematic analysis to move beyond initial comprehension of the data to a more perceptive and coherent understanding of key concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The ongoing revision of the analysis was part of the search for genuine themes, which would "assist in the interpreting or explanation of the data" (Willis, 2013, p. 326).

The themes in this study, in keeping with the features of thematic analysis, were not derived in a quantitative way. In general, a theme should be identifiable across the data set but "it does not need to be present in every data item" (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 230). In qualitative analysis, the importance of a theme is not usually related to the frequency of its occurrence. Rather, "it's about determining whether this pattern tells us something meaningful and important for answering our research question" (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 230). The analytical focus on apprehending patterns in this study was an interest in general trends rather than individual behaviours. It sought to produce interpretive findings rather than technical results, recognising the data gathered as only partial representation of the whole issue, and only one possible interpretation (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011).

Research validity and reliability

A key part of the research design and procedures was attention to validity and reliability in the research. Validity in qualitative research is concerned with whether or not a study authentically investigates, measures and reports what it purports (Basit, 2010; Evans, 2013). Aspects that were borne in mind in the study in order to address validity concerns began with the obligation to employ a critical

methodology, which would ensure correspondence between the research process and an Interpretivist viewpoint (Lapan, 2012). This meant being open to developments in the field and avoiding pre-emptive conclusions about the research findings.

The notion of research validity also involves the need to safeguard truthfulness in reporting by acknowledging both productive and unproductive endeavours (Silverman, 2010). With this requirement in mind, all participant interviews were included in the data analysis and as such, each participant's response contributed to the development of patterns in the data set. Excerpts from each participant interview are reported in the analysis in Chapter 4. At the same time, it is acknowledged that this study incorporates only a small number of participants selected from a culturally and linguistically homogenous population, so little generalisation of the data trends is asserted. The validity applies only to the study cases.

The associated concept of reliability in research refers to the consistency, and trustworthiness of a study (Creswell, 2012). A description of the research procedures, including relevant participant information and the data collection strategy, has been provided in this chapter to assist the reliability of the research. Sample transcripts and data analysis tables are included at Appendices I, J, K and L, as an indication of methodological regularity, with sufficient detail and accuracy to allow theoretical replication. A further aspect of the reliability of the study is consistent linking to relevant literature through all phases of the research.

3.5 Summary of Chapter Three

This chapter has presented the constituent elements of the conceptual framing, along with the ways in which ethical standards have been upheld throughout the research procedures used in this investigation. The paradigm of Interpretivism has been rationalised as a relevant theoretical framework to support the study and to appropriately respond to the research problem. The knowledge claims within this theoretical perspective have been identified as based upon a Constructionist understanding, which suitably accommodates the Catholic context of the study.

The choice of a qualitative methodology has been justified to meet the exploratory requirements of the study.

A key consideration in the research design, as set out in this chapter, has been to ensure the ethical integrity of the study. The vulnerable age of participants means that rigorous attention must be given to respecting their rights and interests. The agency of children is recognised in all phases of this research. The research design acknowledges the need for authentic representation of participant views, as well as the importance of confidentiality.

Overall, this chapter has set the research in a broader context through the use of relevant literature alongside the theoretical framing and methodology. The explanation of the theoretical underpinnings of the study attests to its academic rigour and provides assurance that appropriate procedures were followed throughout the research. The ensuing chapter will show how the theoretical framework and methodology were carried through to data collection and analysis. The chapter will present an overview of the interview procedures and the approach taken in the data analysis. The key themes emerging from the data analysis will be discussed along with illustrative quotes, and the analysis will be linked to relevant literature.

CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of the study is to explore the understandings that children in a Catholic school setting demonstrate through encounters with Christian artworks. In other words, the study focuses on knowledge made evident by children's interpretations of artworks that depict Christian subject matter. Whilst there are previous studies investigating children's understanding of visual artworks, there is little research to date that looks exclusively at children's encounters with Christian artworks. In addition, existing studies focus mostly on an aesthetic dimension of children's interpretation of artworks. This study, however, takes an interdisciplinary approach, which is open to diverse dimensions of children's interpretations of Christian artworks.

This chapter presents the analysis and discussion of data generated through interviews with children and relates it to the literature. The theoretical positioning of Interpretivism, as articulated in the previous chapter, endorses generating data through sharing the frame of reference of participants. The interview strategy used in this study has been purposefully employed to preserve the children's voices and more reliably interpret their meanings (Basit, 2010; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011; Creswell, 2012; Waring, 2012).

The children in the study each interpret a number of visual artworks that depict the biblical narrative of the Annunciation to Mary (Luke 1:26-38). Their interpretations generate relevant data for analysis in response to the question, *'What understandings do children demonstrate through encounters with Christian art?'* Two particular themes are evidenced through the data analysis. One theme is children's knowledge of Christian beliefs, scriptures and traditions. Another theme is children's knowledge of commonplace aesthetic topics such as colour and subject matter. An overview of each of these themes begins the discussion, followed by a detailed explication of the children's understanding of the artworks that, while seeking to highlight patterns across the study, also aims to preserves individual voices.

4.2 Overview of analysis

Two significant themes are identified through the data analysis, which draw together patterns evidenced in children's understanding of Christian artworks. An overview of each is presented here to indicate the broad scope of the themes.

i. Children's Christian understanding of Annunciation artworks

The overarching theme of children's Christian understanding of the Annunciation artworks explores the Christian beliefs and language children incorporate in their interpretations of these artworks. The analysis establishes a baseline of participants' prior knowledge of the Annunciation narrative and then explores the knowledge pursuant from their encounters with the artworks. The theme of Christian understanding relates primarily to the domain of Religious Education, where it has correspondence with the concept of religious literacy, which refers to an individual's understanding of religious concepts, and their use of religious language in appropriate contexts (Goldburg, 2010; Grajczonek, 2007; Ryan, 2006).

In a Catholic context, such as the site of this study, children's religious literacy generally involves their knowledge about Catholic beliefs, scriptures and traditions (Bishops of NSW and the ACT, 2007). For the purposes of this research, however, a broader concept of children's Christian understanding is constructed. This is rationalised by the use of biblical scripture and artworks that are not only part of the Catholic tradition, but belong to the broader Christian community.

The theme of Christian understanding comprises two subcomponents:
- 'Prior knowledge about the scripture', which explores children's prior knowledge of the scriptural account of the Annunciation to Mary; and
- 'What's going on in the painting?' which explores children's understanding of the Annunciation narrative through their interpretations of Annunciation artworks.

Children's aesthetic understanding of Annunciation artworks

This overarching theme explores the everyday aesthetic ideas such as colour and subject matter that influence children's Annunciation artwork preferences and interpretations. The theme of aesthetic understanding relates primarily to the Visual Arts domain, and acknowledges fundamental agreement with existing developmental theories of how children understand art (DeSantis & Housen, 1996; Parsons, 1987; van Meel-Jansen, 2006).

The theme of children's aesthetic understanding initially addresses the patterns with participants' Annunciation artwork preferences. The analysis of children's reasons for selecting or rejecting artworks is guided by consideration of the prevailing aesthetic ideas the participants invoke in their interpretations of the Annunciation artworks. Three aesthetic descriptors or codes are used in the analysis – colour, subject matter and emotional expression. These are *a priori* descriptors, derived from developmental models of aesthetic understanding (Cannon, 2005; Parsons, 1987; van Meel-Jansen, 2006).

The next section of the discussion presents detailed accounts of each of the key themes identified through the data analysis. Each theme is explored through the views and voices of the participants, and all participants are represented within the discussion. The children's comments about the artworks of the Annunciation are distinguished in the text by the use of a distinctive font. Each participant is identified in the discussion by a pseudonym and their age (in years). The children who offer artwork interpretations are: Chloe (age 6); Joshua (age 6); Emily (age 6); Max (age 6); Alex (age 9); Hannah (age 9); Jack (age 9); Lily (age 9); Caitlyn (age 11); Ethan (age 11); Mia (age 11); Riley (age 11); and Tom (age 11).

4.3 Children's Christian understanding of Annunciation artworks

This section elaborates on participants' Christian understanding of the Annunciation artworks. It is concerned with children's demonstration of knowledge about Christian beliefs, and their use of associated religious language, as part of their interpretations of Annunciation artworks. The theme is derived from a set of *in vivo* groupings, that is, coding categories that arise from analysis of concepts invoked by participants (Barbour, 2014). These categories are all associated with aspects of Christian understanding (see Appendix K).

The subcomponents of the theme of Christian understanding are:
- 'Prior knowledge about the scripture', which explores participants' prior knowledge of the scriptural account of the Annunciation to Mary; and
- 'What's going on in the painting?' which explores participants' understanding of the Annunciation narrative pursuant from their interpretations of the artworks. This subcomponent of the theme has four elements:
    – Understanding of the Annunciation narrative;
    – Understanding about Mary;
    – Understanding about Gabriel;
    – Understanding about Christian beliefs, traditions and vocabulary.

Participants in the study range across the age span of primary school being variously six, nine or eleven years old. Overall, through their engagement with the iconography or subject matter of the Annunciation artworks, the children demonstrate a range of knowledge about Christian beliefs, traditions and scripture. The depth of participants' understanding of the narrative of the Annunciation through their interpretations of artworks is largely synchronous with age. In other words, the artwork interpretations of older children generally demonstrate more complex understanding of the biblical narrative than the interpretations of younger children.

An example of children's varying levels of understanding of the scriptural narrative of the Annunciation to Mary can be seen by comparing two participants' responses to study image No. 3 (shown right). Emily (age 6) expresses a short literal understanding of the scripture story, in her artwork interpretation:

Study image No. 3

Emily (age 6): Well, it's like, not only it's showing the two people – the angel's actually speaking to her about it …. I see little words coming out of the angel's mouth.

Ethan (age 11), in comparison, incorporates both literal and inferential levels of scriptural comprehension in his artwork intepretation.

Ethan (age 11): it shows the angel telling Mary (*points to text in image*) that she's gonna be pregnant. They (the words) are small, which might mean she's trying to keep it a secret or something, and also because, um, she's telling Mary and Mary didn't know that yet. So, she's giving the news that God's sent her – I mean God's chosen her to be the mother of Jesus.

In addition to the age-related differences in scriptural comprehension evident in participant's artwork interpretations, there is also an appreciable difference seen by comparing children's prior understanding of the Annunciation narrative with the knowledge they express through artwork encounters. Children's prior knowledge principally demonstrates literal understanding of the Annunciation narrative, whereas the understanding demonstrated through encounters with the Annunciation artworks is often at a symbolic or inferential level. In other words, there is a tendency for children's interactions with the Annunciation artworks to facilitate expression of deeper and more extensive understandings of the scriptural narrative and its key concepts. Comments from Mia (age 11) illustrate this:

Prior knowledge of the Annunciation to Mary
Mia (age 11): Well, Mary was sitting like on her, I think it was like a porch, and an angel came and told her that God was gonna, is like gonna have a son and he wants you, to have it. And then she was like nervous and she didn't know what to do, and then he's like saying "It's gonna be alright, like it's nothing to be afraid". Then she said "Yes".

Interpretation of Annunciation image No. 1 (shown right)
Mia (age 11): I think this represents the world (*gestures to rectangular inset with Mary and angel*) and that's like God in

Image No. 1

heaven (*gestures to picture border above figures*), and he's watching over as Gabriel, angel Gabriel's telling Mary, and she's like saying ok....God's watching down as he's like telling Mary.

Furthermore, participants' interpretations of the Annunciation artworks often incorporate references to aspects of traditional Christian iconography such as the symbolic use of colour and light, the posture and gestures of the figures, and symbolic allusions to God the Father and Holy Spirit. The children's perceptions of iconographic conventions are particularly noteworthy since contemporary awareness of the symbolic language of Christian iconography is not commonplace (McCarthy, 2010). Also, there is no systematic practice of utilising Christian artworks as resources within the Religious Education curriculum. The children in the study do however have some environmental exposure to Christian visual artworks as examples are displayed throughout school walkways and shared spaces.

Overall, the theme of Christian Understanding presented in this section reveals that children are supported by their artwork interpretations to articulate knowledge about a range of Christian concepts. This finding is an important property of the data in relation to the research question: *"What understandings do children demonstrate through encounters with Christian art?"* It indicates the productive potential of Christian artworks and suggests a latent path for primary school educators to enhance students' religious literacy.

Prior knowledge of the Annunciation narrative

The first subtheme explores participants' prior understanding of the biblical account of the Annunciation to Mary (Luke 1:26-38). The ability to understand and appreciate the importance of Christian scripture is a core component of a Catholic Religious Education curriculum (Catholic Education, Diocese of Parramatta, 1999). The story of the Annunciation is a significant scripture in the annual Christian cycle of readings over the liturgical season of Advent. Consequently, students encounter this narrative on a recurrent basis and are encouraged to develop deepening knowledge of it. Whilst the children in the study may be expected to have prior knowledge of the Annunciation narrative,

this was not presumed but rather established by directed prompt during the interview:

Have you ever heard the Bible story about an angel bringing news to Mary that she was to have a baby? It is sometimes called 'The Annunciation'.

This prompt offers a brief synopsis of the scripture (Luke 1:26-38), including three key figures - an angel, Mary and a baby – and this common input is therefore taken as the essential narrative outline and character list.

In addition to establishing a baseline of participants' familiarity with the Annunciation event, this prompt encouraged the children to recall their prior knowledge of the narrative and helped prepare them for the viewing task. The interpretation of scriptural artworks requires integration of visual insights with prior knowledge of the story as what is perceived in an image is influenced by what the viewer anticipates encountering (Alter, 2009; Jensen, 2004). The activation of concepts already stored in the mind helps prepare the ground for visual meaning making (Cochrane, 2014). In other words, eliciting participants' prior understanding of the Annunciation narrative should facilitate their construction of meaning from the artwork by stimulating recall of relevant scriptural events and vocabulary.

All participants in the study were able to articulate some prior understanding of the Annunciation narrative. The ensuing discussion presents the children's prior knowledge, proceeding from youngest to oldest. This chronological arrangement reflects the overall pattern of increasing complexity of prior understanding with age. This progression is seen in the way that older children articulate more developed summaries of the scriptural event and have broader knowledge of scriptural figures than the younger children.

Six-year-old children's prior knowledge of the Annunciation narrative

The six-year-old participants' prior understanding of the Annunciation narrative is shown in Table 1. In general, the six-year-old children - Max, Chloe, Joshua and Emily – have a clear sense of the Annunciation narrative in mind. The

figure of Mary appears to be the principal focus in the narrative for them as they all mention her by name. Max and Joshua intimate particular knowledge about Mary's emotions, stating respectively that she was "a little bit freaked out" and "a bit frightened."

The biblical text (Luke 1:26-38) includes references to Mary's feelings such as 'confused' and 'wondered', however this emotional element was not part of the prompt given to participants. Presumably then, Max and Joshua had an impression of Mary's emotional state from prior encounters with the narrative.

Table 1: Six-year-old children's prior knowledge of the Annunciation narrative

Max (age 6)	We watched a video of it in Kindergarten. Mary was um a little bit freaked out and um she didn't want to have the baby yet 'cos she wasn't even married, she was just engaged.
Chloe (age 6)	Gabriel came to Mary, while Mary was watching her water. I also saw a video of it in Kindy too. *Interviewer: And, can you tell me anything that they said in the story?* Do not be scared.
Joshua (age 6)	Mary was a bit scared when the angel came. She was a bit frightened but then she didn't – she knew that the angel would tell her good news about she would have a baby, from God, be the Son of God.
Emily (age 6)	We watched the video of that in Kindergarten. There were some words that I didn't know that – I didn't know what they meant in there…..It was about when like Mary was collecting water in a bucket and then she was just sitting down and she looks out for some reason and then an angel appears and he says some words that I didn't know what meant.

In addition to identifying Mary as a key figure in the Annunciation narrative three out of the four six-year-old children also make reference to the angel in their prior knowledge. Both Max and Joshua additionally identify a baby as a figure in the narrative, with Joshua declaring that the baby would "be the Son of God." This particular designation for Jesus is part of the angel's message to Mary in the scripture passage; "He will be great and will be called the Son of God Most High" (Luke 1:32-33). Joshua's recall of the designation demonstrates notable competence with biblical language.

It is interesting to note that three of the six-year-old children mention watching a video of the Annunciation narrative in their previous year at school. This audio-visual presentation seems to have claimed their attention as it was readily recalled, and appears to have contributed a particular setting (near water) to their prior knowledge, as both Chloe and Emily talk about Mary being near water. Also of interest are Emily's comments about the video having some words "that I didn't know what they meant." Perhaps the version of scripture in the video contained language that was too difficult for her, or perhaps the meaning of the angel's message was perplexing? This issue notwithstanding, the video evokes a noteworthy response from these youngest participants.

Overall, the six-year-old participants' prior knowledge of the scriptural narrative shows a fair degree of comparability. They each identify key figures in the narrative and articulate a brief summary that demonstrates literal understanding of the story.

Nine-year-old children's prior knowledge of the Annunciation narrative

The nine-year-old participants' prior knowledge of the Annunciation narrative is shown in Table 2. These children - Jack, Alex, Lily and Hannah - vary in the expansiveness of their prior knowledge of the Annunciation. Jack and Lily are able to articulate their knowledge through a narrative synopsis and basic list of characters that demonstrate a literal understanding of the scripture. Alex and Hannah, on the other hand, explain that while they know the story they do not recall much about it. As with younger participants, the principal figure in the narrative for the nine-year-old children appears to be Mary, as they all reference her in their prior knowledge. The next most frequently identified figure is the angel. Jack and Lily demonstrate specific knowledge about the angel's message and Mary's response.

Table 2: Nine-year-old children's prior knowledge of the Annunciation narrative

Jack (age 9)	Um, Joseph had a dream that night that an angel came and then that day um the angel came to Mary and said um I can't believe every w– I can't forget every word – Oh! – remember every word but it's practically they say something about you will have a baby. He will be God's son and you will – you are to name him Jesus. So yeah and then Mary doesn't um know what to say and then she just says ok.
Alex (age 9)	I don't really remember that much. *(Interviewer) Do you remember who was in the story?* Mary and Joephus (sic) and angel.
Lily (age 9)	Yes – well Mary was in her backyard I think and Gabriel came down and told her she was going have a baby and she has to name her, I mean him, Jesus. And Mary told Joseph about it and they went to Jerusalem.
Hannah (age 9)	Well, she had to – well after that she went to tell Elizabeth and, um, like it was a long time ago so [I don't remember].

Jack and Lily's prior knowledge of the scripture indicates awareness of Mary's obedience to the will of God – the humble acceptance that provides a model for all believers (Fallon, 1981). The children's deepening comprehension of the narrative is also shown in their specification of the baby's name as Jesus. This designation is part of the angel's revelation of God's plan in the scripture passage; "God is pleased with you, and you will have a son. His name will be Jesus" (Luke 1:28).

Another feature of note in the nine-year-old participants' prior knowledge of the Annunciation is the identification of figures additional to the basic list. Hannah mentions Mary's cousin Elizabeth, and three out of the four nine-year-old participants mention Joseph, Mary's husband–to-be. Both Elizabeth and Joseph are in the scriptural account of the Annunciation, while Joseph also features in the accounts of the birth of Jesus recorded in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. Over time, Christian tradition has tended to amalgamate the different accounts of Jesus' birth and the Annunciation to Mary (Ryan, 2012). The common tendency to integrate these accounts seems to be present in Jack's response as he recounts "Joseph had a dream that night that an angel came and then that day um the angel came to Mary."

Overall, the nine-year-old participants' prior knowledge of figures involved in the Annunciation event show an increase on the basic set acknowledged by the younger children. Whilst still evidencing scriptural comprehension largely at a literal level this age group shows some deepening awareness of Christian beliefs and a broader knowledge of biblical figures.

Eleven-year-old children's prior knowledge of the Annunciation narrative

The eleven-year-old participants' prior understanding of the Annunciation narrative is shown in Table 3. As shown by these transcripts, the eleven-year-old children - Tom, Ethan, Riley, Mia and Caitlyn - all articulate their prior understanding of the Annunciation in narrative form. In other words, they incorporate some details about what happens and identify the key figures involved in the event.

Table 3: Eleven-year-old children's prior knowledge of the Annunciation

Tom (age 11)	Well, I don't really remember too much but in Year 5 we had a meditation thing about Gabriel coming to Mary – to her house or something – and saying that, um, that you're going to have a baby and it will be named Jesus and, yeah.
Ethan (age 11)	I remember that the angel's name is Gabriel and he goes to Mary and tells her that she's, um, pregnant with, um – and the, the boy – the child's name will be called Jesus….I think I remember that he told Mary that on – oh, I think that's all.
Riley (age 11)	Well she got told to, um, have a baby and it would be named Jesus and it would be the Son of God….. Joseph was the father.
Mia (age 11)	Well, Mary was sitting like on her, I think it was like a porch, and an angel came and told her that God was gonna, is like gonna have a son and he wants you, to have it. And then she was like nervous and she didn't know what to do, and then he's like saying "It's gonna be alright, like it's nothing to be afraid". Then she said "Yes".
Caitlyn (age 11)	I think Mary was like in her house and the, like an angel came and said to Mary that, um, about God and the baby Jesus. And that God has chosen her, and that she would have a child – boy child that was called Jesus and he would show the world what is right.

As with both groups of younger participants, the oldest children chiefly identify the key figures of Mary, the angel and a baby, in a literal retelling of the Annunciation narrative. A distinct difference however is the way in which these older children accord the baby and Mary equal prominence in their prior

knowledge of the narrative using expansive terminology to refer to the baby including: Jesus; baby Jesus; boy; child; son; and Son of God. The older children's knowledge indicates growing awareness of deeper meaning in the narrative as the many references to Jesus in the scripture signify the ways in which he will be recognised as king (Karris, 1990; Ryan, 2012).

Along with the figures of Mary and the baby, most eleven-year-old participants mention the figure of the angel. They also identify figures additional to the basic list of an angel, Mary and a baby. Riley mentions Joseph, whilst Mia and Caitlyn both identify God as a figure in the narrative, demonstrating their inferential understanding of God's role in the Annunciation. The concept of God's authority and love in fulfilling His promise to bring salvation to humankind is brought to light in the Annunciation narrative, and these older students display an awareness of this in the way that they can hold in mind not only the temporal details of the angel's exchange with Mary, but also God's divine purpose in this event. It is evident that, in the main, the eleven-year-old participants' prior knowledge of the Annunciation narrative extends beyond that of the younger children.

Overall, the analysis of all participants' prior understanding of the scriptural account of the Annunciation narrative shows a pattern of gradually increasing complexity with age. The younger children mostly articulate their prior knowledge as a brief synopsis that identifies the key figures involved in the event. The older children generally express their prior understanding in the form of a more extensive narrative synopsis that includes a broader range of figures and details about the event. This pattern fits the general expectation of religious knowledge development in Catholic schools where older children would be anticipated to have greater background knowledge and comprehension of scriptural accounts than younger, especially of events such as the Annunciation that are encountered annually as part of the Christian Church's liturgical cycle of readings.

A question not directly asked of participants is the source of their prior knowledge of the Annunciation narrative. Only four children mention a source – a

video in the case of six-year old Chloe, Emily and Max; and a meditation in the case of eleven-year-old Tom. It is interesting to note that these sources are both multi-modal presentations of the scriptural narrative rather than exclusively linguistic. Diverse ways of interacting with scripture are recognised as enhancing children's scriptural engagement and meaning making (Morrell, 2008). Perhaps that is why the video and meditation remain in the minds of these participants as distinct encounters with the narrative.

A final feature of the children's prior knowledge of the Annunciation narrative worth noting is their suppositions about the setting of the event and Mary's activity. These suppositions may have relevance in the study given that what is perceived in an image is influenced by what a viewer anticipates encountering (Alter, 2009). Whilst the scriptural account does not include details about either of these aspects, a number of children incorporate beliefs about them in their prior knowledge, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Suppositions about the Annunciation setting and Mary's activity

	Annunciation setting	Mary's activity
Chloe (age 6)	Near water	Gabriel came to Mary, while Mary was watching her water
Emily (age 6)	Near water	… Mary was collecting water in a bucket and then she was just sitting down
Lily (age 9)	… Mary was in her backyard I think and Gabriel came down	
Tom (age 11)	Gabriel coming to Mary – to her house or something	
Mia (age 11)	I think it was like a porch	Mary was sitting
Caitlyn (age 11)	I think Mary was like in her house	

To explain the participants' suppositions tabulated above, it seems reasonable to conclude that most children had previously encountered a form of visual representation of the Annunciation. As noted earlier, the school at which the study was conducted has various artworks of the Annunciation on display, so most of the children would have seen these pictures, even if they did not realise

what they depicted. In other words, the children had some environmental exposure to Annunciation artworks, which may have influenced their beliefs about the setting and Mary's activity.

In summary, the analysis of children's prior knowledge of the scriptural narrative of the Annunciation delineates a pattern of gradually increasing scriptural understanding with age. This is reflected in varying knowledge about the key figures involved, and details of the scriptural event. Overall the analysis of the children's prior knowledge of the scripture offers a valuable baseline against which their subsequent understandings, drawn from responses to the artworks, can be compared.

What's going on in the painting?

The subtheme of 'What's going on in the painting?' explores children's observations of the Christian subject matter of the Annunciation artworks. The participants ascribe meaning to depictions of the Annunciation narrative in response to questions such as '*What is going on in the painting?* Or '*What is this picture about?*' The children's meanings often comprise overall interpretations of the artwork, as well as insights into specific aspects including figures, setting or action.

As noted earlier, visual perception is a complex activity influenced by experience and expectation (Alter, 2009; Frei, 1999). In the case of scriptural artworks, interpretation is influenced by prior knowledge of both scripture and visual art (Dillenberger, 1986). Prior knowledge of a scriptural narrative can assist viewers to relate visual elements within a biblical artwork and to imagine events before and after those depicted (Jensen, 2004). As established earlier, all participants had some prior knowledge of the scriptural account of the Annunciation narrative and this, at least theoretically, gave them a starting point for interrelating the pictorial elements to construct meaningful interpretations of the Annunciation artworks.

The viewing purpose is another influence on artwork interpretation. Viewers who approach artwork interpretations from an analytical or

informational purpose may restrict understanding to listing and describing discrete visual details, while those who adopt an aesthetic viewing purpose are more likely to engage emotion and imagination in the interpretation process (Frei, 1999; Walsh, 2006). Whilst children tend to interpret images from both aesthetic and analytical positions (Frei, 1999), in this study they were given a predominantly analytical standpoint, which may have influenced the nature of their interpretations.

A further challenge in the process of interpreting artworks is the way in which the meaning of an image seems to be presented all at once (Alter, 2009; Callow, 2008; Walsh, 2006). In other words, an image has no obvious start or finish, so viewers must construct their own narrative or connections between the visual elements.

Integrating visual elements into an Annunciation narrative

The children's responses to the question, 'What is going on in the painting?' appear to be of two distinct types – itemised or integrated. That is, some participants attend to the individual features visible in an artwork, and their interpretations essentially comprise a list of picture elements in isolation to each other. Other participants respond to the same artworks by integrating the visual elements they observe and expressing their interpretation of the subject matter as an Annunciation narrative.

Generally, the integration of picture details into a whole is a more challenging cognitive activity than listing the components, and leads to the construction of greater meaning, as it requires the viewer to interpret and reinterpret the subject matter (Frei, 1999; Goldburg, 2010). Previous studies of children's interpretation of images indicate that the ability to integrate picture details into a whole is not innate; rather it develops with maturity and art viewing experience (Frei, 1999; van Meel-Jansen, 2006). In other words, constructing an integrated interpretation of an artwork is not only a developmental characteristic, but also a skill that increases with practice.

Participant interpretations of images No. 1, No. 2 and No. 6 are discussed below to illustrate the way that children's understandings of the artworks are variously presented as visual elements in isolation to each other, or as an integrated Annunciation narrative. These interpretations also show how a number of children display deeper awareness of the scripture as a result of encounters with Annunciation artworks than is evident in their prior knowledge.

Image No. 1

Image No. 1 (shown at right) is a representation of the Annunciation from a private devotional book, the *'Belles Heures'* or Beautiful Hours, created in France 1405-1408 CE (Alphonso, 2015). The main purpose of this form of painting was to inspire viewers to prayer and meditation (Cook, 2005). Several children select image No. 1 as one of the best Annunciation images, and variously interpret the artwork as a list of visual elements or as an integrated narrative. Alex (age 9), for instance, likens the image to a Bible and notices a

Image No. 1

number of the visual features, however he does not integrate the subject matter into a narrative of the Annunciation:
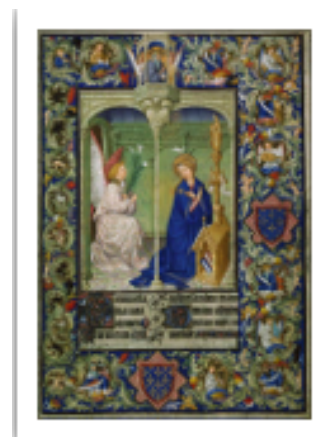
Alex (age 9): It's – this one it's a very, it's a very, very - it's like all many pictures around it and like an angel. It's like a Bible a bit. It's like a Bible and Mary and the angel. There's like birds down here (pause) and pictures.
Interviewer: What makes it a good picture?
Alex: Cos there's like a church here and um, (pause), um, it's like a Bible.

Ethan (age 11) also selects image No. 1 as a preferred Annunciation image but, in contrast to Alex, Ethan constructs connections between the visual details he observes to give an interpretation of the artwork in the form of an Annunciation narrative:

Ethan (age 11): …. It looks like again Gabriel's telling her the news and it looks like um she is um [Gabriel] is giving - has flowers in her hand as maybe a sense of God or something. And also um they - Mary has a little light around her head showing that she's important….I can, I think I can see a dove, I'm not sure but yeah again the dove represents God's presence in the story.

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Ethan integrates the individual picture elements into a narrative which, when compared with his prior knowledge, expresses a greater depth of scriptural understanding. In other words, Ethan's interpretation of image No. 1 is a deeper insight into his understanding of the scripture, as he observes symbolic aspects of artwork including the flowers that Gabriel is giving Mary as "maybe a sense of God or something", and that Mary has "a little light around her head showing that she's important." Ethan seems to recognise these symbolic conventions as denotations of Mary's virtuous nature. Similarly, his observation that "the dove represents God's presence in the story" aligns with traditional iconographic use of the dove to symbolise God's central role in the Annunciation (McCarthy, 2011; Schiller, 1971). Overall, Ethan's interpretation of the iconographic details of the artwork manifests his awareness of inferential meaning in the scriptural narrative to a greater degree than is evident in his prior knowldge.

Mia (age 11) also selects image No. 1 as a preferred Annunciation image. She highlights particular visual details as she interprets the subject matter and coherently integrates these elements into an Annunciation narrative:

Image No. 1

Mia (age 11): They've put like – well you can't see it really clearly but how that might be like God and the two angels (*gestures to figures in centre top border*) and then like they've put everyone around it – they've put like all these people around it. Like angels up there and they put like animals – I think they're two, what's it called, flamingos. Yeah. And then they've put Mary and, I think this represents the world (*traces to rectangle framing Mary and angel*) and that's like God in heaven (*gestures to figures on balcony overlooking Mary and the angel*) and he's watching over as Gabriel - angel Gabriel's telling Mary and she's like saying ok....God's watching down as he's like telling Mary.
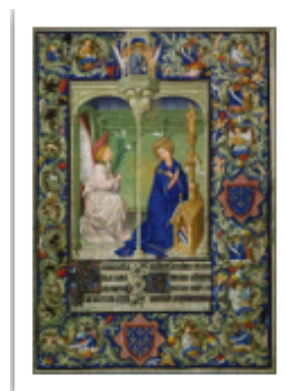
God's role in the Annunciation to Mary is made more evident in Mia's interpretation of the artwork than in her prior knowledge, where she simply noted that that the angel told Mary "God was gonna, is like gonna have a son and he wants you, to have it." In her artwork interpretation Mia recognises God as the figure looking down upon the meeting between Mary and the angel. The symbolic inclusion of God the Father in Annunciation images is an iconographic convention emphasising His central role in the fulfilment of the promise to send a Messiah (Schiller, 1971). Mia's interpretation of the traditional Christian iconography of

this image offers greater insight into her cognisance of God's authority than is evident in her prior knowledge, and demonstrates awareness of inferential meaning in the scripture.

Image No. 2

Image No. 2 (shown at right) is a representation of the Annunciation in the form of a traditional Eastern icon. Two six-year-old children chose it as a preferred Annunciation artwork. Both these children observe a range of iconographic conventions in their interpretations of the painting, which they incorporate into a simple narrative of the Annunciation. Emily (age 6), for instance notices the proximity of the figures to each other, a tradition used to express a more intense connection between Mary and the angel (Schiller, 1971):

Image No. 2

Emily (age 6): I like it how they're really near each other. So it's like if one of them's speaking they can hear each other really well.

Emily's approval of the close proximity of the figures can be compared with her prior knowledge of the Annunciation narrative, where she seemed to present Mary and the angel's meeting as a chance event. Greater insight is gleaned into Emily's scriptural comprehension, however, through her subsequent interpretation of image No. 2, where she signals her awareness of the purposeful nature of the exchange between Mary and the angel.

Another participant who finds image No. 2 appealing is Chloe (age 6). She integrates the visual details of the artwork into a narrative of the Annunciation and recognises the symbolic meaning of a range of features:

Chloe (age 6): It's got what people of God have on their heads like that (*points to image*). I think it's a halo … [it means] they're part of Jesus' family. She – Mary's standing on a stool and then the angel comes down to tell her the message. Well, she's holding her hand out like that like telling her a message or they could be actions to tell her the message…There's that seat and the stool just there. There's a big house here which could be Mary's.

Chloe's prior knowledge of the scripture is given as a succinct précis whereby Gabriel and Mary meet near water. Her interpretation of image No. 2 however, provides deeper insight into her understanding of the scripture. Chloe's interpretation of the haloes as meaning Mary and Gabriel are "part of Jesus' family" corresponds to the iconographic convention of haloes as symbols of transcendent connection (McCarthy, 2011). She also perceptively attributes meaning to the angel's outstretched hand, a gesture that traditionally indicates Gabriel is addressing Mary (Schiller, 1971). Overall, Chloe's use of the artwork's iconographic features seems to enable her to articulate deeper understanding the Annunciation narrative.

Image No. 6

Image No. 6 (shown at right) is an early 17th Century representation of the Annunciation. It is a preferred Annunciation image for two six-year old children and one nine-year-old. The children's responses show different ways in which the iconography of the image is interpreted, and varying degrees of integration of the visual details into a scriptural narrative. Max (age 6) notices a number of elements in the picture, and seems to enjoy exercising his descriptive and imaginative abilities. He speaks readily about what he sees, making associations with his 'friend's mum' but does not relate the elements into an Annunciation narrative. His response is characteristic of interpretations of young children, who tend to notice the individual elements of a picture rather than seeing it as a whole, and who may accept whatever association comes to mind without considering whether or not it is relevant to the subject matter (DeSantis & Housen, 1996; Parsons, 1987):

Image No. 6

Max (age 6): Mary looks like my friend's mum – brown hair, a little bit like the same kind of face, a little bit of the same kind of clothes she wears, and I think the same kind of skin.
Interviewer: Can you tell me what's happening in the picture?
Max: I think that something on there is like glowing, I think. I see flying babies (*Laughs*). I think that's maybe like a curtain or something (*pointing to top left of picture*). And it looks like a little book on a special special stand maybe.

Max's prior understanding of the scriptural narrative focuses on Mary's heightened feelings. In his interpretation of image No. 6 he also focuses on the figure of Mary, observing features that remind him of his "friend's Mum". He observes a range of other visual details however does not attempt to relate them into an Annunciation narrative. Jack (age 9), on the other hand, promptly identifies Mary and the angel in his interpretation of image No. 6 and goes on to relate them in an integrated narrative:

<u>Jack</u> (age 9): I think this is the angel and this is Mary and Mary's like holding her head back and just looks really confused and like just not normal. And then the angel's just like sitting there and his mouth's a bit open so you can tell that the angel's speaking. And yeah – that's like really realistic. …. Just the colours. Like if you get confused you would probably just - and see an angel - you'd probably just stay back a bit (*leans back in seat to demonstrate*) because you could think that like you never know what could happen!

Jack, in his prior knowledge of the Annunciation narrative, indicates his awareness of the concept of Mary's obedience to the will of God. This awareness is evidenced in a more extensive way in his interpretation of image No. 6 as he construes the meaning of Mary's posture. He embodies the pose himself indicating a deep engagement with the emotion of the narrative. Jack's embodied response to the iconography of the painting is consistent with the intention of 17th century Christian artists, who emphasised posture and gesture in order to engage viewers with the spiritual significance of scripture (Cook, 2005). Jack's embodied interpretation of image No. 6 is an interesting contrast with his prior knowledge, which was delivered from an unemotional standpoint. His use of the iconography to engage with 'what's going on in the painting' seems to be an effective prompt to greater participation in the scriptural narrative.

Overall, as the interpretations of images No. 1, 2 and 6 demonstrate, there is noticeable variation in participants' understanding of the biblical subject matter of the artworks. Some children express their understanding of what the painting is about by listing visual elements of an artwork largely in isolation to each other. Many however integrate their interpretations into an Annunciation narrative, providing notably greater insight into their comprehension of the scripture than evident in their prior knowledge of the narrative. There is no strong age-related pattern of children's integration or non-integration of picture

elements. What is evident, however, is that children often articulate not only literal but also inferential comprehension of the scriptural narrative when explaining what is going on in the painting. This feature of participants' responses suggests the potential for encounters with scriptural artworks to assist children to express more comprehensive understanding of scriptural narratives, thus offering beneficial insights for educators.

Understanding about Mary

This section of the discussion explores the way in which children draw on iconographic aspects of the artworks' depiction of Mary to support their understanding about her as a figure in the Annunciation narrative. Traditional Christian iconography of Mary uses symbolic colours and postures to indicate her role in scripture and Church tradition (Boss, 2008; Dillenberger, 1986; McCarthy, 2011). As noted earlier, is reasonable to assume that participants had no prior instruction on the symbolic language of Christian art. Nonetheless, many of the children identify a range of Christian iconographic conventions for portraying Mary in their interpretations of Annunciation artworks.

<u>Iconographic conventions for portraying Mary</u>

Traditional iconography of Mary from the 15th century CE onwards presents her in characteristic attire and postures. The characteristic colour for her clothing in Christian artworks is predominantly blue, symbolising her spiritual or heavenly qualities (Boss, 2008; McCarthy, 2011). This may be combined with red, to indicate her human qualities such as compassion, or Mary may have white attire as well, to represent her Immaculate Conception (Boss, 2008). Traditional postures for depictions of Mary are sitting or kneeling, with an open book – a portrayal that symbolises her piety or wisdom, in order to encourage Christians to similar devotional practice (Boss, 2008; Fletcher, 2012; Schiller, 1971). Seven of the twelve Annunciation images used on the study depict Mary in mainly blue attire and incorporate traditional Christian iconography of a kneeling or sitting posture.

<u>Mary's clothing</u>

Two children comment on the recurring colour scheme for Mary's clothes in the course of their interpretations of Annunciation images. Riley (age 11) mentions the colour of Mary's clothes as he speaks about image No. 8 (shown at right), a contemporary image by

Image No. 8

Greek artist Nicolas Ghika. His initial comment about the artwork is a list of traditional iconographic features that help him to identify Mary and the angel:

Interviewer: Can you tell me why this is a good picture?
Riley (age 11): Because you can see the angel because it's got wings and it's in white and it's got a halo. And Mary's down there and she's in purple.

When asked if there is anything he wonders about the picture he brings two other images alongside (as shown below) and questions the recurrent iconography of Mary's posture as well as her clothing, (which he describes variously as purple or blue over the course of the interview):

Riley (age 11): [*Looking across images No. 11, No. 8, & No. 3*] I wonder why she's sitting down - like in these three pictures she's all sitting down, and like she's always wearing purple.

| Image No. 11 | Image No. 8 | Image No. 3 |

Riley's wondering about the similarity in Mary's posture and clothing across the three images shows meaningful engagement with the figures in the Annunciation artworks. It considerably extends the attention he accords Mary in his prior knowledge of the narrative. The process of interpreting the artworks seems to prompt Riley to greater consideration of Mary's significance in the narrative.

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Mia (age 11) is another participant who notices a similarity in Mary's clothing across images. She chooses image No. 10 (shown at right), which depicts the Annunciation in a suburban American setting, as a good representation of the Annunciation scripture. The artist's choice of a contemporary backdrop follows a tradition of portraying scripture in present-day settings that goes back to the Renaissance (Collier, 2010; Cook, 2005). This feature is intended to bring viewers emotionally closer, as they more readily identify with figures in the painting (Collier, 2010). Mia's interpretation of the work shows her appreciation for the modern setting:

Image No. 10

Mia (age 11): It's showing you like a modern day sort of, because you can tell by the house and how she's dressed, like the shoes and the little house in the background. And it's like showing you the modern day version which I think is good for all grades cos it shows you how it would look like now where we are, like and it makes you understand better….It shows you more of an understanding, so if you see it and like your perspective.

The depth of Mia's engagement with image No. 10 is considerable. She draws a comparison between it and image No. 7 (shown below), initially noting the difference in setting, then the similarity in the iconography of Mary's clothing across the two images:

Mia (age 11): If you saw (*points at No. 7*) you know how it like how it tells you it was old like then, and that was what it was like drawn, like when it was happening. And this (*points at No. 10)* and she's doing it – they're doing it - and they're trying to make it look like now.

And I also noticed they're wearing the same dress [*points at images No. 7 and No. 10,*] like they're trying to resemblance that's Mary …'cos like Mary is known for having blue and white - a dress of blue and white - and they've re-enacted it as her having a blue and white dress. Yeah, I think it's really cool how they did that. I just noticed it….they've made a resemblance.

Image No. 7

Mia's perception of the correspondence between the iconography of these images (which were produced in two different historical and cultural settings) demonstrates significant engagement with the artworks. She evidences comprehension of some of the contextual features and traditional iconography that is intended to contribute to an inferential level of scriptural meaning (Jensen,

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2004). Mia's prior understanding of the Annunciation briefly described Mary's role in the scripture, while her interpretation of the images presents more extended attentiveness to the figure of Mary.

<u>Mary's body language</u>

Image No. 7, discussed above in regard to Mary's clothing, is an Annunciation artwork that also prompts participants to interpret her body language. Mary is depicted kneeling with a scroll on the floor in front of her and hands clasped together as she faces the angel. The iconographic conventions of this pose are symbolic of Mary's humility and piety (Schiller, 1971). Many of the children notice Mary's posture and variously interpret it to mean she is reading or praying, or both, as shown in these comments:

<u>Chloe</u> (age 6): She could be reading. [It looks like] a piece of paper with writing on it that you can hold sometimes when you give a message.

<u>Alex</u> (age 9): There's like an angel there and Mary's looking at it and um and she's praying.

<u>Tom</u> (age 11): She's trying her best to listen of the news and she's also like making a prayer sign like as she's praying.

Whilst many of the children interpret Mary's kneeling posture to mean that she is reading or praying, her posture is also interpreted as indicative of her emotional state. Traditional Christian iconography employs various hand gestures, postures and facial expressions to indicate Mary's emotional state at the Annunciation. For instance, Mary's hand may be raised to indicate astonishment, or her palm turned outward as an expression of awe (Schiller, 1971). Alternatively she may be portrayed with two hands outstretched to the angel, or with her head inclined to indicate her welcome and acceptance of God's word (Schiller, 1971).

The children's comments about Mary's portrayal in image No. 3 (shown at right) exemplify their attention to the depiction of her emotional state. Joshua (age 6) interprets Mary's posture as

Image No. 3

an indication that she is nervous, and he emphasises this by embodying the pose himself:

Joshua (age 6): Maybe Mary would be feeling a bit nervous in feelings in this picture.
Interviewer: What is it that tells you she's a bit nervous?
Joshua: Like, she's not like (*he sits up straight*)– she's like whoo! (*he jumps back in his seat with his hands across his chest*) – and she's like a bit surprised and a bit like shocked and nervous.

The embodiment of Mary's posture is a feature of a number of children's responses to the artworks. Hannah (age 9) also uses an embodied response to the image to convey her interpretation of Mary's feelings:

Hannah (age 9): Mary's like 'Why me?' (*she demonstrates by crossing her arms*)
Interviewer: What's that showing you?
Hannah: Maybe like, 'It can't be me'. Or, it's so good or something. It's in her heart. …
Or how can it be me? or something.
Interviewer: What do you think the feeling in the picture is?
Hannah: Like, she's blessed and she's like (*pause*) happy that it's like her.

In addition to using posture to interpret Mary's emotion, participants also use her facial expression as evidenced by Caitlyn (age 11):

Caitlyn (age 11): Well, it kinda tells the angel, um, telling Mary about his son, it kinda shows it more, like Mary's expression.
Interviewer: So tell me what you can see in Mary's expression.
Caitlyn: Um like maybe a little confusion, and fear and happiness.

The biblical passage shared with participants at the start of the interview states, "Mary was confused by the angel's words and wondered what they meant." The children's subsequent interpretations of the Annunciation artworks greatly expand on this limited terminology to include comments about Mary appearing worried, sad, confused, frightened, nervous, scared, shocked, shy, surprised, thankful, blessed or happy. In other words, the breadth of vocabulary used by the children to interpret Mary's emotional state in the artworks goes well beyond the vocabulary of the biblical account.

The prevalence and diversity of the children's comments about Mary's feelings is in accord with previous research, which recognises visual meaning making as a holistic activity (Cornett, 2011; Dobbs, 1998; Harris, 1988). Children, in particular, have a natural inclination to engage emotionally and imaginatively

with images as well as intellectually (Frei, 1999). The many comments made by the children in respect of Mary's feelings reflects this characteristic of visual art to stimulate holistic engagement from viewers, encouraging "understanding with feeling" (Empereur, 1990, p. 168).

Overall, the children identify a range of aspects related to the depiction of Mary within the Annunciation images. They interpret traditional iconographic conventions, such as clothing colour, posture, gesture and facial expression to identify Mary and determine her activity and emotional state. The understanding about Mary that is expressed in the children's interpretations of Annunciation artworks greatly enlarges on the understanding demonstrated in their prior knowledge. This tendency suggests the utility of encounters with scriptural artworks as resources to support children's religious literacy and to demonstrate their scriptural knowledge.

Understanding about the angel Gabriel

This section explores the children's observations about the depiction of the angel Gabriel in Annunciation artworks. There is a long history of iconographic conventions for depicting the angel Gabriel as part of the Annunciation narrative and, as with portrayals of Mary, traditional Christian iconography uses symbolic colours and postures to indicate Gabriel's role in the Annunciation (Boss, 2008; Dillenberger, 1986; McCarthy, 2011).

<u>Iconographic conventions for portraying Gabriel</u>

One of the key characteristics in traditional Annunciation iconography is the depiction of Gabriel in white clothing or bathed in light, which indicates the angel's transcendent nature (Fletcher, 2012; McCarthy, 2011). Another typical trait is the presence of wings designating the angel's role as a heavenly messenger (Boss, 2008). Other customary features for depicting the angel in Annunciation artworks include a kneeling pose to denote respect for Mary's

future position as the Mother of God (Boss, 2008; Schiller, 1971). The angel is often represented with a hand raised or outstretched to indicate that he is addressing Mary (Schiller, 1971). Alternatively he may have his hands together pointing at Mary as a gesture of command (Schiller, 1971). In many images of the Annunciation the angel is offering Mary a white lily, a symbol of life and of Mary's purity and suitability to be chosen as the mother of God's son (Boss, 2008; Fletcher, 2012; Schiller 1971).

Gabriel's characteristics

Children from all age groups in the study notice a range of features regarding the depiction of the angel in their interpretations of the Annunciation artworks. They remark on the angel's physical appearance such as clothing and wings. They also observe the angel's gestures and postures. A number of children comment on the white lilies and speculate about their significance. In other words, the attributes of Gabriel that are remarked upon by the children largely correspond with aspects of traditional iconography.

The children's understandings about the angel Gabriel are illustrated by their comments in respect of image No. 7 (shown at right), which is one of the most preferred images across all ages of the study. Participants of all ages readily identify the angel in this image by iconographic features. Max (age 6) for instance, whose prior knowledge of the Annunciation narrative focuses entirely on Mary, explains how he distinguishes the angel in the artwork:

Image No. 7

Max (age 6): It's glowing and it's got like a white little cave and um it looks like a boy and Mary isn't really a boy name.

Max's interpretation of this and other Annunciation images leads him to express understanding about the angel, which goes beyond that evident from his prior knowledge. Similarly Hannah, (age 9) says nothing about the angel in her prior knowledge, but when studying image No. 7 confidently declares:

Hannah (age 9): That looks like an angel because it's got like all the light around it. And um she's kinda praying while she's telling her (*demonstrates how the angel's hands are held together*).

Another child who does not mention the angel at all in prior knowledge is Riley (age 11). The importance of the angel is however greatly heightened in his interpretation of image No. 7. It is in fact the depiction of the angel that seems to guide him in his overall understanding of the image:

Riley (age 11): Well, when you first see it, because it's got all the light around it you get drawn to the angel first, and then you can see Mary looking at the angel….I think the angel would be um focused on what she's saying, or what he's saying to Mary. And Mary would be focused on what the angel's saying and listening.

Whilst many of the children's remarks about Gabriel's appearance in the artworks appear to be a checklist of features that they perceive to be typical angel characteristics – wings, white clothing, light - there are some comments by older participants that indicate a more inferential reading of the iconography. Tom (age 11), for example, reflects on the broader significance of light, and on the nature of angels:

Tom (age 11): it was the glowing light and angels usually do have like a glowing ring on top of their head because well I'm not quite sure but it's probably because it means that – well it's helpful and sometimes you have a conscience. There's like, sometimes you can have a sinner or like an angel but mostly you're probably gonna have to like follow the angel because the angel will tell you the good news and what's the right thing to do instead of just yeah being a bad person.

The significance of light around Mary and the angel in Annunciation images is generally understood to represent the light of Christian faith (Fletcher, 2012). Rays of light are also used to symbolise the divine Word of God that is being pronounced by the angel to Mary (Schiller, 1971). Tom expresses his perception of the angel as a being who is like a conscience, which substantially expands on his prior knowledge. His interpretation of the artwork provides valuable insight into his symbolic understanding of the angel's role.

Ethan (age 11) also speaks about the light around the angel in image No. 7, and through this comment demonstrates awareness of an inferential understanding of the angel's significance in the narrative:

Ethan (age 11): The angel has a bright light around it and that to me shows that she's quite important to the story.

Whilst Tom and Ethan demonstrate a symbolic level of iconographic interpretation in regard to the use of light in image No. 7, Lily (age 9) reveals her understanding in another way. Lily compares and contrasts representations of the angel from two markedly distinct images of the Annunciation that were produced roughly 400 years apart, and which evidence how Christian iconography is not an invariable set of symbols. Scriptural artworks, like interpretations of scriptural texts, carry varying emphases across time and culture (Cook, 2005). Lily's observations draw attention to these changes:

Lily (age 9): the angel (*in image No. 7*) actually looks like it's something real 'cause see how that's (*indicates angel in image No.3*) like got wings, I think that that angel (*now referring back to angel in image No. 7*) looks more like it's from heaven…it's wearing white and it's sort of glowing.

Image No. 3

Image No. 7

Whilst contemporary students may bring an untrained eye to interpreting artworks, they are still capable of perceptive evaluations, as shown by Lily's judgment of why the depiction of the angel in image No. 7 is better than that in image No. 3. In Lily's view a glowing wingless angel looks more real and "like it's from heaven", than a winged representation. Her reasoning and explanation demonstrates a significant level of cognitive engagement with the artworks - a recognised characteristic of visual art encounters (Alter, 2009; Apostolos-Cappadona, 2005; Dobbs, 1998; Harris, 1988).

Gabriel's body language

As well as observations about characteristics of the angel such as the wings, white clothing, and light, some children interpret Gabriel's hand gestures and posture. Chloe (age 6) and Riley (age 11) for instance, interpret the hand gestures of the angel in image No. 11 (shown at right),
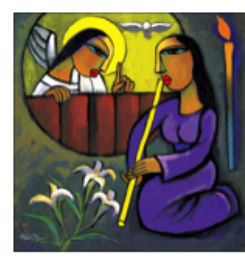

Image No. 11

a contemporary depiction of the Annunciation narrative by Chinese American artist He Qi. The children's interpretations of the angel's hand gestures closely align with traditional understandings of Annunciation iconography, whereby the angel's raised hand indicates he is addressing Mary (Schiller, 1971).

Chloe (age 6): Mary's outside or inside and the angel comes out telling her, well, putting her finger up which could mean she's singing a song or telling her something.

Riley (age 11): Well, the angel's like telling her with her finger and everything.

The children's interpretation of the angel's gestures seems to draw them into the interaction between Mary and the angel. This is also evident in the responses to image No. 4 (shown at right), a depiction that combines two iconographic traditions - the angel's kneeling posture, which acknowledges Mary's honoured position as the Mother of God, and the gift of the white lily that symbolises her purity (Boss, 2008; Fletcher, 2012).

Image No. 4

Jack (age 9) selects this image as one of the best pictures of the Annunciation, and notices both the flower and the kneeling posture in his interpretation of the painting, which is recounted in full below. Jack's interpretation is a vivid illustration of the way in which children engage with the body language depicted in an artwork, as well as the way in which visual meaning making is a creative and dynamic process.

Jack (age 9): Mary's kneeling down to Jos- to the angel Gabriel and she's like, she's probably shocked but she's also thinking, like thanking God and you can see that because she's kneeling down and she's like really thanking the angel. And I don't know if he's giving her the flower or she's giving him the flower....... you can see the

emotion on their face, 'cos the um angel's like – looks a bit, um, sad but, or not sad but she – he wouldn't probably be sad. It just looks like he might just be thinking 'Why she's? I thought she would – if you would go to any other person they would probably just go, 'Yep, alright. I'll take it. Thank you'. But she might be …. she's like….kneeling down and just….

Interviewer: So when you say 'she' – 'she' Mary, or 'she' the angel?
<u>Jack</u>: Yep, Mary.

Interviewer: And Mary's kneeling down?
<u>Jack</u>: Yeah, and um – Oh! Is that the angel? Oh! I got confused. I thought that was the angel (*pointing to standing figure*).

Interviewer: I wonder what made you think the standing one was the angel, and the kneeling one was Mary?
<u>Jack</u>: 'Cos Mary was really Catholic so um you would think they would like kneel to the angel.

Interviewer: And what's changing your mind now?
<u>Jack</u>: 'Cos I saw the wings on the kneeling person. And I can just – it just makes more sense for Mary to have that look rather than the angel.

Jack's interpretation of this artwork seems to proceed predominantly through engagement with the postures and gestures of the figures. His initial interpretation shows how viewers can take a particular perspective that reflects their understanding and experience of the world to date (Alter, 2009; Frei, 1999; Plate, 2002). Jack sees the kneeling posture in the painting as significant, and on the basis of existing knowledge (that 'Mary was really Catholic'), initially assumes the kneeling figure is Mary. As he explains, it seems right for Mary to adopt a kneeling posture to show respect to God's messenger. As a consequence of his expectations, it appears that Jack does not observe the wings on the kneeling figure until he reviews the image.

Interpreting images requires people to use what they know to make sense of the unknown (Cochrane, 2014; Frei, 1999; Plate, 2002). Jack draws on his understanding of the facial expressions of the figures depicted and his knowledge of the scriptural narrative, and is clearly perplexed by what he sees. The expression on the standing figure (which he first identifies as the angel) is particularly puzzling to him - it does not seem to fit with his expectations (that the angel 'probably wouldn't be sad'). Jack's subsequent reversal of the identities in the artwork follows from the interviewer's query, however Jack is clearly an

active participant in reinterpreting the image. He is already pondering his interpretation and perhaps would have gone on to independent revision. Ultimately Jack is seeking to make sense of the image and as he concludes, "it just makes more sense for Mary to have that look rather than the angel." Jack's final understanding of the painting is constructed through a process of interpretation and reinterpretation. This iterative process of integrating the individual pictorial details into a whole leads to greater meaning in the visual experience (Frei, 1999; Goldburg, 2010).

Overall, the children identify a range of aspects related to the depiction of Gabriel within the Annunciation images. They interpret traditional iconographic conventions, such as clothing colour, posture and gesture to identify the angel and understand his interaction with Mary. The children's understanding of the figures in the Annunciation narrative expressed in their artwork interpretations greatly enlarges on the understanding demonstrated in their prior knowledge. This finding suggests the potential of supporting children's religious literacy through encounters with scriptural artworks.

Understanding of Christian beliefs, traditions and vocabulary

As evidenced in preceding discussions, Christian artworks can contain rich symbolic iconography that adds a layer of inferential meaning to viewers' understanding of the scripture depicted (Jensen, 2004). Much of the symbolism of Annunciation artworks relates specifically to the figures of Mary and the angel, however, participants' interpretations of the symbolism are not limited to these key figures. Other Christian beliefs, traditions, and vocabulary are evidenced in their responses. This section of the discussion presents the broad range of Christian beliefs that the children invoke in the course of their Annunciation artwork interpretations. The range of references are summarised below in Table 5a (participants aged 11 years) and Table 5b (participants aged 6 & 9 years).

Table 5a: References to Christian concepts in interpretations (age 11 years)

Key Christian concepts	Participant references
Holy Spirit Light/Grace Dove/Peace/ Holy Spirit Wise men Birth Star Prayer Halo/blessing Communion Saviour Angelus Dove/God's presence	<u>Tom (age 11)</u> – it's probably the Holy Spirit or something. Well, darkness isn't really such a good thing but when it comes to the light it's actually, I mean, like you're filled with grace and all that. – Doves are actually a sign of like peace or something – yeah, the Holy Spirit I think. – You'd probably spread the news that it's gonna happen because in the wise men of the birth they wouldn't know what happened until somebody sent them a message or because of the star. – She's also like making a prayer sign, like, as she's praying.. her hands, like, they're joining together. – And there's like a ring on top of her head, which probably means she's being blessed by the Holy Spirit or something. – She's doing this (*indicates with hands folded across chest*), which means, well, when you're going to get your Communion it means you're wanting to be blessed. – it's respectful to bend down to your saviour <u>Ethan (age 11)</u> – It looks like it's from the Angelus I think. – I can see a dove which probably shows God's presence where they're standing. – It looks like um she is um (Gabriel) is giving, has flowers in her hand as maybe a sense of God or something. And also they - Mary has a little light around her head showing that she's important. – The dove represents God's presence in the story.
Halo/light Saint Heaven	<u>Mia (age 11)</u> – the bright light like shining on the angel and Mary – that represents they're like a saint – like they're really special…. Like if you see a picture of, well most pictures of Jesus, has like the ring, the gold ring around to, um say, he's like really special like. – I think this represents the world (*gestures to rectangular edge of inset with Mary and angel*) and that's like God in heaven (*gestures to picture border above figures*), and he's watching over as Gabriel, angel Gabriel's telling Mary, and she's like saying ok….God's watching down as he's like telling Mary.

Table 5b: References to Christian concepts in interpretations (age 6 & 9 years)

Key Christian concepts	Participant references
Prayer Halo Candles Bible	<u>Joshua (age 6)</u> – I can see like this person holding its hands together – maybe it's praying? <u>Chloe (age 6)</u> – *(The angel is)* holding his hands together, like you were praying; – it's got what people of God have on their heads, I think it's a halo … (it means) they're part of Jesus' family; – there's some candles which means she could be praying. <u>Emily (age 6)</u> – That person is giving that person a Bible.
Bible Catholic Kneeling Dove/Holy Spirit/Peace Prayer	<u>Jack (age 9)</u> – there's a scroll with something on it ..it might be like a Bible or something. So it could tell – it could show that [Mary] she was really Catholic. – [Mary's] thanking God and you can see that because she's kneeling down – I also like how there's the bird up there … It's the Holy Spirit, I think. 'cos the Holy Spirit has- is the dove <u>Lily (age 9)</u> – I think it's a little dove there. The dove is (pause) - Is it the sign of peace? <u>Hannah (age 9)</u> – She's kind of praying while she's telling her and there's the dove?

As evidenced by Tables 5a and 5b, the older children demonstrate more expansive knowledge of Christian beliefs, traditions and scripture than the younger children. This finding reiterates the expected pattern for students in Catholic schools of increasingly comprehensive religious literacy with maturity and experience. The children's interpretations of Annunciation artworks also offer insights into individual knowledge, and as such, offer educators constructive potential for both collective and individual assessments of religious literacy.

Image No. 3

The participant responses to image No. 3 (shown at right) indicate further the way in which children's interpretations of an artwork provide insights into their religious literacy. Image No. 3 reflects the Christian iconographic traditions of the Renaissance. It incorporates symbolic references to Christian beliefs in the depiction of the key figures of Mary and the angel, as

Image No. 3

well as in the setting. Mary and Gabriel's meeting takes place in an open Italian porch or loggia with arches and columns that heighten the focus on the figures (Fletcher, 2012). God the Father oversees the encounter from the top of a column, depicted within a circle, which is a symbol of infinity (McCarthy, 2011). From here he sends forth the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, symbolically emphasising that Mary's conception is through God's Word (Boss, 2008; Fletcher, 2012; Schiller, 1971).

One insight afforded by the children's interpretations of image No. 3 is their awareness of God's role in the Annunciation. Chloe (age 6) for instance wonders reflectively about the depiction of the figure at the top of the column:

Chloe (age 6): And I wonder why there's that just there (*indicates the portrait at the top of the column*). It looks like someone who was an important person – on the top of an important building maybe.

While Chloe does not identify the "important person" as God, perhaps in a class setting, with the support of her peers and teacher, she may well have interpreted this symbolic reference. The other symbolic allusion to God in the artwork, that is, the Holy Spirit in the form of the dove, whilst not observed by any of the six-year-olds, is noticed by a number of the older students. Tom (age 11) and Ethan (11) both demonstrate an inferential understanding of this symbol:

Tom (age 11): I can also see the dove, which is like in another one that I can see, and there's like a ring on top of her [Mary's] head, which probably means she's being blessed by um the Holy Spirit or something.

Ethan (age 11): I can see a dove which probably shows God's presence where they're standing.

Neither Tom and nor Ethan's prior knowledge of the Annunciation narrative includes mention of God the Father, or the Holy Spirit. Their expressions of understanding in response to the artworks, however, provide deeper insight into their scriptural knowledge and overall religious literacy.

Summary of Christian understanding of Annunciation artworks

The analysis and discussion presented under the overarching theme of children's Christian Understanding has explored the knowledge about Christian beliefs, traditions and scripture that participants express through interpretations of Annunciation artworks. Children's Christian understanding is taken here as analogous to the concept of religious literacy, which is a fundamental aim of Catholic school education, where students are encouraged to interact with the world in ways that reflect a Christian perspective (Catholic Education Diocese of Parramatta, 1999).

The analysis establishes participants' prior understanding of the Annunciation narrative as a baseline against which their understanding of the narrative through interpretations of the iconography or subject matter of Annunciation paintings can be considered. Overall, the analysis shows that primary school children are able to articulate knowledge about a range of Christian concepts through interpretations of iconographic features such as clothing, posture and symbols in Annunciation artworks. Furthermore, these interpretations generally give greater insight into children's overall religious literacy than is evidenced in their prior knowledge of the Annunciation narrative.

The analytic theme of Children's Christian Understanding is a significant property of the data in relation the research question, *"What understandings do children demonstrate through encounters with Christian art?"* The participants in this study consistently demonstrate insightful interpretations of the scriptural narrative of the Annunciation to Mary. This finding suggests a potential path for

primary school educators to enhance students' Christian understanding through systematic encounters with scriptural artworks, as well as a practical method of assessing religious literacy.

4.4 Children's Aesthetic understanding of Annunciation artworks

The analytic theme of aesthetic understanding explores children's preferences with respect to the Annunciation artworks, as well as the aesthetic topics they evoke in their interpretations. The theme unifies analysis of the *a priori* coding categories of colour, subject matter and emotional expression, which are aesthetic topics derived from developmental models of understanding art (DeSantis & Housen, 1996; Parsons, 1987; van Meel-Jansen, 2006). The children's insights into these aesthetic topics provide a useful entry point into analysing their aesthetic understanding of Annunciation artworks (as per Appendix L).

Whilst the aesthetic coding categories applied to the data in this research are derived from previous studies, there is a distinct difference between the subject matter of the artworks used in this study and that of the artworks used in earlier studies of children's art interpretation. This study employs artworks depicting specifically Christian subject matter, rather than works with broad ranging subject matter. It is essential therefore to empirically investigate any patterns in children's preferences in order to see if previous findings apply with respect to children's preferences and interpretations of Christian artworks. Knowledge about children's preferences in relation to Christian artworks has potential value for educators, as it will offer a guide for choosing appropriate and effective artworks for interdisciplinary teaching and learning at different developmental stages.

Aesthetic preferences and topics

The aesthetic topics of colour, subject matter, emotional expression, artistic style and technique are common ideas people use to talk about and understand artworks (Parsons, 1987). Developmental models of aesthetic understanding indicate that people's picture preferences are influenced by insights into these common topics (Cannon, 2005; DeSantis & Housen, 1996; Parsons, 1987). This means that as aesthetic development progresses, individuals gain new insights into aesthetic topics, which provide further direction for their understanding of the meaning of a visual artwork.

Children's aesthetic preferences are typically influenced by their understandings about the topics of colour and subject matter (Lin, 2004; Parsons, 1987; van Meel-Jansen, 2006). Younger children tend to be attracted to artworks on the basis of sensory properties such as strong colours, while older children are more likely to be attracted to images due to qualities of the subject matter such as realism and beauty (Parsons, 1987; van Meel-Jansen, 2006). Another topic that may influence the artwork preferences of older children is emotional expression (Cannon, 2005; Parsons, 1987).

Annunciation artwork preferences

The data generation activity in this study invites children to nominate preferred depictions of the Annunciation narrative from a set of twelve artworks (see Appendix A). Most participants give thoughtful consideration to this task - some closely inspect individual images, while others scan backwards and forwards across the complete set of images. Several children quickly move preferred images aside, while others spend an extended period on the selection task. On average, the children explain their preferences in regard to six or seven Annunciation images. A tabulation of all participants' preferences, both for and against the artworks, is shown in Table 6, where preferences are grouped by age.

Selecting or rejecting an image is an observable behaviour. It can indicate the influence of aesthetic topics such as colour, subject matter or emotional expression, on children's underlying assumptions about visual representations

(Parsons, 1987). Each of the children in the study was asked to choose the artworks they most preferred or thought best conveyed the biblical narrative of the Annunciation. As children indicated their preferred images they were asked questions such as '*Why did you choose this picture?*' or '*What makes this a good picture?*', in order to explore which aesthetic topics were instrumental in their positive preferences. Similarly, when children rejected or expressed disliked for a particular artwork, they were asked questions such as '*Why wouldn't you choose this picture?*' or '*Why is this not a good picture?*', to explore which aesthetic topics were instrumental in their negative preferences.

All participant responses – both preferences for and against artworks - are presented in Table 6. The preferences are amalgamated across age groups in order to make the responses more representative of the developmental groupings that operate in school environments. The use of age groupings in the analysis allows it to be more sensitive to any developmental patterns in aesthetic understanding.

As Table 6 demonstrates, the most notable pattern evident in the artwork preferences of participants is the congruence in children's responses to images No. 3, No. 7 and No. 12. This is seen in the widespread positive preferences for images No. 3 and No. 7, and overall rejection of image No. 12. These patterns of congruence apply across all age groups in the study, suggesting substantial correspondence in all participants' underlying assumptions about visual artworks or their aesthetic understanding.

A further look at the clustering of preferences reveals other potentially significant patterns. There are some images such as No. 2, that seem to appeal only to younger children, and others such as No. 1, that are principally attractive to older children. Along with the more widespread patterns of preference, each of these minor patterns is investigated in the ensuing discussion, by drawing authentically on the children's voices.

Table 6: Annunciation artwork preferences

		6 year old children	9 year old children	11 year old children
Image No. 1			✔✔ ✖	✔✔✔
Image No. 2		✔✔		
Image No. 3		✔✔✔	✔✔✔	✔✔✔✔✔
Image No. 4		✔	✔✔ ✖	✔
Image No. 5		✖✖	✖✖	✖✖
Image No. 6		✔✔	✔	
Image No. 7		✔✔✔✔	✔✔✔✔	✔✔✔✔✔
Image No. 8		✔ ✖	✔✔	
Image No. 9		✔ ✖	✖✖✖	
Image No. 10			✔	✔✔✔
Image No. 11		✔ ✖✖	✔	✔ ✖
Image No. 12		✔✔ ✖✖	✖✖✖✖	✖✖✖✖✖

Key: ✔ preferred image   ✖ rejected image

120

Most appealing Annunciation artworks

As shown in Table 6, some of the artworks in the study are obviously more appealing to children than others. The artworks of the Annunciation most preferred across all age groups are No. 7 and No. 3. The children's reasons for preferring these artworks are expounded below.

<u>Image No. 7</u>

Image No. 7 (shown at right) is a depiction of the Annunciation that was painted at the end of the 19th century. Mary is kneeling, turning to face the angel who is surrounded by an aura of light. All participants express a positive preference for this image. The majority of children articulate reasons that focus on the subject matter of the image, which is characteristic of children's aesthetic development (Lin, 2004; Parsons, 1987; van Meel-Jansen, 2006). Table 7 presents participants' reasons for choosing image No. 7 as one of the 'best' pictures of the Annunciation to Mary.

The data generation activity directed children's attention to the subject matter of the Annunciation images, asking them to evaluate the artworks as recognisable depictions of the scripture passage. It thereby presented the children with an inherent cognitive challenge, as it demanded they go beyond their own point of view on an artwork to consider the perspective of other children. The literature indicates that awareness of other points of view is not present in very young or naïve viewers but rather is acquired with cognitive maturity and experience (Parsons, 1987). The particular demands of the artwork selection activity may, however, have encouraged the children to bear in mind other viewpoints when interpreting the artworks, as most participants seem to meet the challenge as seen in the responses in Table 7 where direct quotes preserve participants' perspectives on the artworks.

Table 7: Reasons for selecting image No. 7

	Reasons for selecting image No. 7 **WILLIAM BRASSEY HOLE** Annunciation (ca. 1890)
6 year old children	Max: Because I think that they would understand this would be angel Gabriel and this would be Mary (*indicating right and left hand side figures respectively*). Joshua: Because I like the light coming from – I don't think – I don't know what it is. I just like it. I like the light coming from that person or something – it might be an angel but I can't see its wings. Chloe: Because it's got an angel in it, and there are angels in it, so children would know there are angels….and if I was teaching the kids would know that there would be an angel. Emily: Well, they're both there and it's like he's – the angel's just appeared. And she (Mary) looks kinda worried.
9 year old children	Jack: Cos it clearly shows which one's Mary and which one's the angel. Alex: Cos there's like an angel there and Mary's looking at it and, um, and she's praying. Lily: She's inside…the angel actually looks like it's something real. Hannah: Because that looks like an angel because it's got like all the light around it. And, um, she's kind of praying while she's telling her (*demonstrates how the angel's hands are held together*). And Mary was praying and then the angel came in and told her.
11 year old children	Tom: Because it's actually got a bit of detail and …because you can see the angel which is mostly part of the story, and Mary. Ethan: It looks like Mary has been praying maybe and Gabriel, the angel, comes down. Riley: It's very like clear and you can see where the angel is. Mia: Well it's quite like – it's quite like – it's not too complicated but as well it's like nice. It shows you like Mary and the angel quite clearly and it's just a really nice picture. Caitlyn: Because it's just like plain and clear about, you can see the angel and you can see Mary sitting down.

An examination of reasons for participant's preference for image No. 7 indicates that even some of the youngest children are able to meet the cognitive challenge to consider other perspectives in selecting images. Max (age 6) and Chloe (age 6), for instance, overtly indicate that they hold in mind consideration of other points of view in their evaluation of the artwork:

Max: Because I think that they would understand this would be angel Gabriel and this would be Mary (*indicating right and left hand side figures respectively*).

Chloe: Because it's got an angel in it, and there are angels in it, so children would know there are angels….and if I was teaching the kids would know that there would be an angel.

Both Max and Chloe show concern for other children being able to 'understand' and 'know' what the pictures depict. In some instances, participants do not overtly mention other viewers but seem to imply that they are bearing them in mind. Jack (age 9) and Caitlyn (age 11), for example, give reasons for choosing images, centred on the figures being clear and easy to see:

Jack (age 9): Cos it clearly shows which one's Mary and which one's the angel.

Caitlyn (age 11): Because it's just like plain and clear about, you can see the angel and you can see Mary sitting down.

Another concern that the children seem to bear in mind in selecting artworks, which contributes further to the cognitive challenge, is deciding if the subject matter of the artwork matches their prior understanding of the Annunciation narrative. Tom (age 11) and Hannah (age 9) both indicate this in respect of image No. 7:

Tom: Because it's actually got a bit of detail and …because you can see the angel which is mostly part of the story, and Mary.

Hannah: And Mary was praying and then the angel came in and told her.

One notable exception to preferences based on the subject matter of the paintings is the rationale offered by Joshua (age 6). Joshua's attraction to image No. 7 seems to be influenced by his fascination with light rather than a concern to identify the subject matter as a depiction of the Annunciation, as he insistently states, "I like the light…I just like it. I like the light…". Joshua's response is consistent with research showing that very young children are intrinsically attracted to

sensory properties of artworks such as colour and light (Parsons, 1987; van Meel-Jansen, 2006). In other words, these children primarily enjoy the experience of looking at a picture, and consequently understanding the subject matter is a less important concern (Cannon, 2005).

Image No. 3

Another popular image across all age groups is image No. 3 (shown right), a painting produced in the early 15th century CE that shows the figures of Mary and the angel meeting in an Italian loggia or porch. Table 8 (below) is an inventory of participants' reasons for choosing image No. 3 as one of the 'best' or 'most helpful' pictures. These reasons indicate again that those who select image No. 3 as 'good', do so primarily out of a consideration for the artwork's subject matter and whether it recognisably conveys the Annunciation narrative.

The concern for correspondence between the subject matter of the artwork and knowledge of the biblical narrative is perhaps more accentuated in responses to image No. 3 than in responses to images No. 7 discussed above. The interpretations of No. 3 often go beyond recognition of the key figures to focus on the exchange between Mary and the angel. The children's focus on the interaction between Mary and the angel in image No. 3 is particularly evident in the reasons given by older students, such as Lily (age 9) and Riley (age 11) shown in Table 8.

Image No. 3, as discussed earlier, richly incorporates Renaissance Christian iconography. Perhaps this iconographic detail prompts the children to incorporate a more extensive description of the scriptural narrative in their reasons for selecting this artwork. Overall, the children's articulation of aspects of the narrative as part of their reasons for selecting image No. 3 provides valuable insight into their understanding of the scriptural text, including their grasp of Mary's reaction to the news, as seen in the responses of Hannah (age 9) and Caitlyn (age 11) in Table 8.

Table 8: Reasons for selecting image No. 3

	Reasons for selecting image No. 3 **FRA ANGELICO - Annunciation** **(1433-34)**
6 year old children	Joshua: I just like the angel her… her wings….They look golden, and I like the colour of that Chloe: It's night-time and I can see that straight here. And they're in a house around here, and the angel is holding this bit like this so Mary won't panic Emily: Well, it's like, not only it's showing the two people – the angel's actually speaking to her about it …. I see little words coming out of the angel's mouth.
9 year old children	Jack: 'Cos it, um, the angel's just saying like 'Don't worry' and Mary's like, she's had a Bible on her lap and she's just crossing her arms like that (*crosses arms across his chest to demonstrate*) which might be a sign of – um I don't know – just thanksgiving or something. Lily: You can see, um, that's there's been put um little words there and you can see that it's talking to Mary… and Mary's thinking by her hands um thinking 'how is this going to happen?' Hannah: 'Cos, it kind of like shows how she's telling her that she's like got a–having a baby and how she's like saying – trying to say like 'how does that mean'?
11 year old children	Tom: probably because some words, but you can't really read them, but some words are coming out of his mouth so yeah that means he's saying something to Mary Ethan: I chose it because, um, the, um, the children they will be quite familiar with it because it looks like it's from the Angelus I think. And also because it shows the angel telling Mary (*points to text in image*) that she's gonna be pregnant. Riley: Because in this one you can see them clearly like in that one. And there's, she's um she (Mary) looks like she's listening and concentrating really well…. And the angel's telling her. Mia: I like um how you can um see clearly it's the angel and how like he's talking to Mary and she's, she's like listening and he's just like 'sh'. Oh, wait - I don't know if he's like saying 'sh' but like he's talking – you can see the words coming out a bit. Caitlyn: Well, it kinda tells the angel um telling Mary about his son, it kinda shows it more, like Mary's expression.

One notable exception to participants selecting image No 3 on the basis of correspondence between the subject matter and the Annunciation narrative is again Joshua (age 6). His choice of this image is based on his pleasure in the colour of the angel's wings firmly stating, "I just like the angel her... her wings....They look golden, and I like the colour of that". This reasoning, like Joshua's selection of image No. 7, is clearly centred on his attraction to a sensory property of the artwork rather than the subject matter. Perhaps as a consequence of his disregard for the subject matter of images No. 3 and No. 7, Joshua's interpretations, while rationalising his aesthetic preferences, offer little insight into his understanding of the scriptural text. In other words, a consequence of Joshua's aesthetic development appears to be that the Annunciation artworks have limited value as scaffolds for religious literacy. Further investigation of the potential of artworks to facilitate scriptural understanding in very young viewers is needed to better understand the relationship.

<u>Image No. 1</u>

One artwork that attracts a number of positive preferences, exclusively from older children, is image No. 1 (shown right), which is an illustration from a medieval prayer book. Table 9 offers an inventory of the children's reasons for choosing image No. 1 as one of the 'best' or 'most helpful' pictures.

The responses of Alex (age 9) and Hannah (age 9) appear to be based on their ability to recognise features of the subject matter, and at least in Hannah's case, to identify correspondence with the scriptural narrative. The responses of the eleven-year–old children, however, show a more diverse aesthetic appreciation. Tom (age 11) for instance interprets some of the symbolic features of the picture. He interprets the flowers as a 'good signal' and the dove as 'the Holy Spirit' and a 'sign of peace'. Ethan (age 11) appreciates the artistic style of the painting, indicating it has 'a good sense of colour'. Mia (age 11) also values the artistic style having 'really nice detail'.

Table 9: Reasons for selecting image No. 1

	Reasons for selecting image No. 1 **P. & J. LIMBOURG - Manuscript illumination** **(ca. 1405 -1409)**
9 year old children	Alex: Cos there's like a church here and um, (pause), um, it's like a Bible. Hannah: 'Cos it looks like she's (Mary's) praying – I'm not sure what that is (*indicates church model beside Mary*) …. And um she's [the angel's] kinda doing the same thing as her, like trying to tell her … she's like kinda speaking to her [Mary] with her hand actions.
11 year old children	Tom: Well, Mary's just standing there. She's probably thinking why is this true? But probably flowers is just like a good signal and he's giving them to her and also, saying along with that like, you're gonna have a baby … and a dove up here, but I've forgot what that actually meant so, but, doves are actually a sign of like peace or something – yeah, the Holy Spirit I think. Ethan: Well, it's got a very good sense of colour and it's um it looks very old and maybe even - Oh and it looks like something that's out of a church. Mia: I just think it's like, again with the detail it's really nice, and like it shows you like really nice detail. And it shows you like how the angel's there and Mary's there, which is good. Caitlyn: Oh, I've seen this picture a lot of times as well and um I kinda get - Mary's in the same position as most of them with her arms crossed over her chest and, um, the angel is there like having hands moving.

A common feature of most theories of visual meaning making is the notion of progressively expanding capabilities of art interpretation with maturity and experience (DeSantis & Housen, 1996; Freeman, 2010; Parsons, 1987). This means that as children mature their interpretation of art will change, drawing on a broader understanding of the world so that they increasingly acknowledge emotional expression as well as artistic ability and skills in an artwork (DeSantis & Housen, 1996; Parsons, 1987).

Overall, the findings in the area of most appealing artworks, show that the majority of children have a well-defined preference for Annunciation artworks incorporating realistic representations, reinforcing the findings of related studies (Lin, 2004; van Meel-Jansen, 2006).

Least appealing Annunciation artworks

The picture preferences of all participants (shown in Table 6) reveal that as well as general agreement about the most appealing images, there is also consensus about the least appealing images. The least appealing Annunciation artwork across all age groups is clearly No. 12. There is also a pattern of rejection of images No. 5 and No. 9. An exploration of the reasons why children reject these three images reveals an overwhelming concern for the clarity of the subject matter, echoing the children's primary reason for selecting images.

<u>Image No. 12</u>

All except two of the youngest children dislike image No. 12 (shown right). This artwork is a largely abstract depiction of the Annunciation. Table 10 presents an inventory of participants' reasons for rejecting image No. 12. As the comments in Table 10 show, the children consistently reject image No. 12 because of a perceived lack of clarity or realism in the subject matter. Emily (age 6) for instance, notes that "you can't really see what's going on and who looks like who", while Chloe (age 6) declares "I don't really understand what they mean."
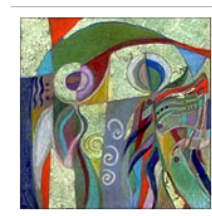
The children's concern for recognisable subject matter in their artwork preferences is characteristic of the aesthetic development of most school age children (Parsons, 1987). The meaning of an artwork for children is generally linked to interpretation of the subject matter whereby "realism helps to clarify the content of the artistic message" (van Meel-Jansen, 2006, p. 110). Children's rejection of image No. 12, due to difficulty interpreting the subject matter, supports the findings of previous studies that show visual meaning making requires making sense of a pictorial message (Freeman, 208). The abstract nature of the subject matter of image No. 12 does not meaningfully communicate the scriptural text to the majority of participants.

Table 10: Reasons for rejecting Image No. 12

	Reasons for rejecting image No. 12 **CHRISTINA SAJ – Annunciation** **(ca. 2000)**	
6 year old children	Chloe: because I don't really understand what they mean. Emily: Because it's like you can't really see what's going on and who looks like who – it just looks all like just kind of like shadows of something.	
9 year old children	Jack: because it's just – you can't really see what they're doing like and when I first saw it I couldn't even see the sh - the body – the shape of their body. I could just see colour patches. I can see them now, but, it's just a bit hard to understand, for my age. Alex: Yes, there's like no actual um, like these kind of peoples. It's just like drawn weird things on it. And I don't - can't really see it really…and not really real background. Lily: You can't really see what the picture is that much. Hannah: Well, I can't really tell who's who. And like, it doesn't have much – it doesn't really show what Mary's doing or what the angel's doing.	
11 year old children	Tom: Well, this one doesn't really, um, work that much because it's kind of …probably going to confuse little kids they'll be saying like what is this 'cos it's kind of like a stained glass window. Ethan: because you can't really see in a sense that's its an actual angel and also that Mary's been given the news…you can see a faint shadow of the angel but not very clearly so I think if I'm trying to teach the children it would be quite hard for them to get a sense and see what it's like. Riley: Because you can't really see it clearly and if you showed it to a Kindy or maybe Year 1 class they would just think it's just a whole bunch of colours on a page. And you can't really tell that that's an angel, just looks, yeah. Mia: It took me a while to figure out what this one (NO. 12) was, and then I realised the angel. Caitlyn: You can't really see what, like the angel or Mary. You can't really see it clearly and you can't – it might be like for older children, they might get it but the younger children that are just learning about God they won't really get what it means.	

Not all participants, however, reject image No. 12. Max (age 6) and Joshua (age 6), choose it as one of the best. Their rationale is based on the artwork's colour, rather than concern for recognisable subject matter:

Max (age 6): It looks beautiful and colourful.
Interviewer: Can you tell me what that picture's about? What's happening in that picture?
Max: Mmm um (long pause) I can't think of the word…Well, it's kind of about um I think maybe colours, I think it might be about. I don't understand it really, actually.

Joshua (age 6): It's colourful and, um, yeah, like it looks good and like I think these might be like eyes or something or like a photo.
Interviewer: What can you see is happening in that picture?
Joshua: It's colourful but I can't really see anything happening.

The difference between Max and Joshua's selection of image No. 12, and other children's rejection, corresponds to findings of developmental models of aesthetic understanding. Max and Joshua's preference for this colourful artwork, despite being unable to understand the subject matter, is characteristic of the earliest stage of aesthetic development (Cannon, 2005; Parsons, 1987; van Meel-Jansen, 2006). For Max and Joshua, this painting seems to be about colours rather than about the Annunciation narrative. Other participants appear to have moved on to the next stage of aesthetic development, where the principal focus in aesthetic understanding is subject matter. In other words, most participants seem to expect the subject matter of the artwork to recognisably depict the Annunciation, otherwise they reject it as meaningless.

Images No. 5 & No. 9

The other images that a number of children reject are No. 5 and No. 9. The prevailing reason for rejecting these artworks is again articulated as the lack of clarity of the subject matter. In other words, participants cannot identify the figures or action of the Annunciation narrative in the subject matter of the paintings.

Image No. 5

The comments about image No. 5 (shown right) made by Lily (age 9) and Riley (age 11), typify the children's rejection of this picture due to difficulty in discerning aspects of the subject matter:
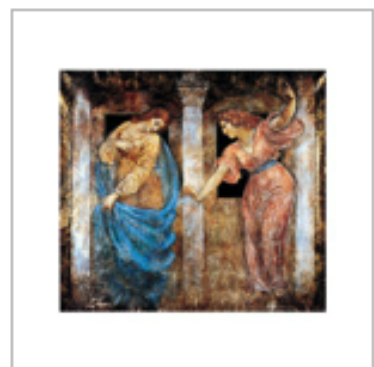
Lily (age 9): Well, it's not very clear who the angel is and who, um, Mary is....'cos you can't see – they look like they're dancing sort of.

Riley (age 11): It's really rusty. And you can't really see how that's an angel, or that's the angel - I don't know which one is 'cos it just looks like two ladies in a room pretty much. You can't tell them apart.

Similarly, the comments about image No. 9 (shown right) made by Alex (age 9) and Hannah (age 9) characterise the way that participants struggle to meaningfully interpret the subject matter of this picture:

Alex (age 9): Cos, like all weird pictures and you can't really see what it is - means that much.

Hannah (age 9): Cos I can't really see like what's happening and can't like see where Mary is or (pause) where they are. Well, I kind of know where they are but like it doesn't tell that much.

Image No. 9

The crucial importance of subject matter in the children's aesthetic understanding of the Annunciation pictures is repeatedly demonstrated across the majority of participants' picture preferences. This agrees with developmental models of aesthetic understanding, which indicate that subject matter is one of the most likely aesthetic topics to be invoked by children in the course of interpreting artworks (Lin, 2004; Parsons, 1987; van Meel-Jansen, 2006).

A third aesthetic topic that appears to have some influence on the picture preferences of older children is emotional expression. This tends to be manifest in the reasons why an image is rejected rather than selected.

The exchange with Caitlyn (age 11), in respect of image No. 8 (shown right), illustrates how the lack of expressiveness in the painting influences her appreciation of the Annunciation picture:

Caitlyn (age 11): Oh, you can't really tell which one is Mary and which one is the angel. Or you can't um and their heads are kinda bowed and sidewards, so you can't see like any expression, or any feeling.

Image No. 8

Interviewer: So, having expression or feeling in a painting is part of what makes it a good painting (participant nods). What are some other things?

Caitlyn Or if it goes to something if its like a happy story and there's like dull colours it won't match the story very well. And if it's like not, they aren't looking like that good, or if it's like a bit confusing so that other people, some people might get it but not everyone, like get what they mean.

Interviewer: So, dull colours don't go with a happy story. What sort of colours fit with the Annunciation story?

Caitlyn: Maybe like a bit of bright colours and a bit of dark colours – not just all bright and not just all dark.

Caitlyn's reasons for rejecting image No. 8 show how apprehending the emotional expression is a significant aspect of her understanding of the subject matter of the Annunciation artworks. She uses her awareness of the body language of the figures, and a cognisance of the symbolic use of colour, to consider emotional expression in her interpretation of the painting. These perceptions are characteristic of a more mature insight into understanding an artwork's subject matter (van Meel-Jansen, 2006).

Summary of aesthetic understanding of Annunciation artworks

Overall, the patterns of aesthetic understanding demonstrated through children's selection and rejection of Annunciation images, shows notable congruity. This is a significant property of the data in relation the research question, *"What understandings do children demonstrate through encounters with Christian art?"* The artworks are largely selected or rejected by children as a result of their insights into the works' subject matter. In other words, subject matter is the prevailing topic or idea in most children's aesthetic understanding.

Some variation in the influence of subject matter is however seen across age groups in the study. Two of the youngest children, Max and Joshua, are distinguished by an attraction to sensory properties of Annunciation artworks such as light and colour, rather than a focus on the intelligibility of the subject matter of the artworks. This supports research showing that younger children are intrinsically attracted to colour and other sensory properties of visual art such as

texture, shape and the use of light (Parsons, 1987). Amongst the oldest participants there is an indication of developing awareness of emotional expression in their aesthetic understanding. This also aligns with developmental models of understanding art, which indicate interest in emotional expression is a more mature insight into making sense of art (van Meel-Jansen, 2006).

The variation seen in the influence of subject matter on aesthetic understanding across age groups in the study whilst relatively minor is nonetheless significant. These findings are in general accord with developmental models of interpreting art, which show that there is a pattern of variation in what people notice about artworks. With maturity and experience individuals develop increasingly complex understandings so that they come to "make better sense of works they encounter" (Parsons, 1987, p. 5). Knowledge about children's aesthetic preference in relation to Christian images has value for educators. It offers a potential guide for choosing appropriate and effective images for teaching and learning at different developmental stages.

4.5 Summary of Chapter Four

The interviews conducted in order to generate data in this research invite participants to interpret a range of visual artworks depicting the narrative of the Annunciation to Mary (Luke 1:26-38). Participants express a range of interpretations demonstrating their individual understanding of the artworks. Two significant themes that respond to the research question are evident in the analysis of this interview data.

One theme revealed by the data analysis is children's Christian understanding of the Annunciation artworks, which comprises different aspects of knowledge about Christian beliefs, scriptures and traditions. An important finding here is the way in which the children's interpretations of Annunciation artworks provide greater insight into their understanding of the scriptural narrative than is expressed in their prior knowledge of the story. A key aspect of this expanded insight is many participants' expression of inferential scripture

meaning through their interpretations of the religious symbols and references of the artworks' Christian iconography.

A second theme in the analysis is children's demonstration of aesthetic understanding of the Annunciation artworks. This aspect of the analysis reinforces findings of previous studies of children's interpretations of visual artworks. It shows that children's predominant focus in evaluating and interpreting Annunciation artworks is on the subject matter. Most participants in the study evidence a strong preference for realistic representations of the Annunciation narrative that recognisably depict the key figures of Mary and the angel.

Overall, the analysis of the interviews reveals significant patterns in the way that children understand Christian artworks. A key issue arising from these findings is consideration of how aesthetic development might influence the way in which children construct meaning from Christian artworks. The implications of this and other aspects of the study are discussed in the next chapter, along with recommendations for Catholic primary school educators regarding the potential of Christian images as resources in Religious Education and other educational domains.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This final chapter begins with an overview of the study before summarising the research findings and making recommendations based on knowledge developed by the research process. The conclusions of the study highlight the implications for Catholic primary school educators, as well as offering suggestions for further research into children's interpretations of Christian artworks.

5.1 Research overview

The purpose of this study is to explore children's interpretations of Christian artworks, as an initial step towards meeting a gap in research knowledge. The study is set within a Catholic primary school, where the researcher's teaching experience indicates the value of Christian artworks in supporting children's learning. The study takes an interdisciplinary approach to respond to two issues within the Catholic education sector: the need to enhance student's visual interpretation skills across all curriculum areas (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2013); and the need for more effective strategies to address falling levels of student religious literacy (Bishops of NSW and the ACT, 2007).

The study involves 13 Catholic school children ranging from six to eleven years of age, and is situated in the researcher's place of employment in western Sydney. The underlying question, 'What understandings do children demonstrate in encounters with Christian artworks?' is explored through individual participant interviews that provide a purposeful scaffold for data generation as well as scope for participants to follow their own thinking (Vidovich, 2003).

Prevailing research in the Visual Arts domain provides understanding of the developmental characteristics that influence children's aesthetic understanding. These studies indicate that the principal focus in children's art interpretations is the subject matter of the artwork (DeSantis & Housen, 1996; Parsons, 1987; van Meel-Jansen, 2006). The findings of this study affirm existing research by showing that the emphasis of primary school children's interpretations of Christian

artworks is also on the intelligibility of the artwork's subject matter. In other words, children's explanation of what a paintings means is mainly drawn from their interpretation of the subject matter and is evidenced in this study by children's recurrent focus on recognising the pictorial elements of the Annunciation narrative. This tendency is shown in the study by participants' recurrent concern to identify pictorial elements that relate to the scriptural narrative of the Annunciation.

In addition to affirming earlier research, this study adds original knowledge about the way that children's encounters with Christian artworks can facilitate interdisciplinary knowledge and skills. The data shows that artworks depicting Christian subject matter can support children to articulate not only aesthetic dimensions of understanding but also understanding of narratives, symbols and vocabulary. Participants frequently show deeper comprehension of a scriptural narrative through interpretations of artworks than evidenced as prior knowledge of the story. Encounters with Christian artworks encourage children to articulate religious concepts and vocabulary in their meaning making endeavours, as well as prompting the interpretation of iconographic conventions. This demonstration of the interdisciplinary potential of children's interactions with Christian artworks is valuable knowledge for primary school educators and researchers.

5.2 Conclusions of the research

This study presents an initial step towards developing knowledge about how children in a Catholic educational context understand Christian artworks. It offers information about the way that children make sense of visual artworks of a significant biblical narrative. The principal conclusions of this study are:

i. **Dimensions of children's understanding of Christian artworks**

There are two key dimensions of understanding apparent in children's interpretations of Annunciation artworks. These dimensions are Christian understanding of Annunciation artworks, and aesthetic understanding of Annunciation artworks. Children's Christian understanding is articulated in the

study as knowledge of a biblical narrative and understanding of a range of Christian iconographic symbols. Children's aesthetic understanding of the artworks is articulated as knowledge about everyday aesthetic topics such as colour, subject matter and emotional expression.

ii. Inferential understanding of a scriptural narrative

Children's encounters with artworks of the Annunciation to Mary often demonstrate symbolic or inferential understanding of this biblical narrative. The scriptural comprehension articulated through children's interaction with artworks is frequently deeper and more extensive than that expressed as prior knowledge of the story. In other words, there is a tendency for children's encounters with biblical artworks to provide enlarged insights into their understanding of a scriptural narrative and its key concepts, extending beyond literal knowledge to reflect more complex inferential comprehension.

iii. Interpretation of traditional Christian iconography

Children are able to recognise symbolic meanings of traditional iconography in Christian visual artworks such as: the use of colour and light; the posture and gestures of the figures; features of the setting; and symbolic references to God. The iconographic conventions appear to prompt children to articulate knowledge about a breadth of Christian scripture, teachings and tradition. In particular, children in this study notice many iconographic features that are associated with Mary's role in scripture and Church tradition.

iv. Integrating visual elements into a narrative

Many participants use the individual visual elements of a picture to construct an integrated interpretation of the artwork in the form of an Annunciation narrative. This integrative endeavour is a more cognitively challenging activity than listing individual visual features as it requires the viewing experience to be interpreted and reinterpreted, leading viewers to the construction of greater meaning (Frei, 1999; Goldburg, 2010). The children in the study frequently

integrate picture details into a narrative as part of their artwork interpretations, relating individual elements into an inferential or symbolic understanding of the scripture story.

v. Cognitive and affective engagement in a scriptural narrative

The study shows that children's engagement with the Christian iconography of Annunciation artworks, as part of their interpretation, is typically a prompt to significant cognitive and affective engagement in a scriptural narrative. The physical embodiment of postures in artworks is seen frequently in participant's responses to the paintings. This embodiment reflects the characteristic way that visual art can stimulate an emotional response from viewers, encouraging "understanding with feeling" (Empereur, 1990, p. 168). The children's attention to the interaction between Mary and the angel, evidenced in their interpretation of the figures' gestures, also inclines them to greater engagement in the narrative.

vi. Children's focus on the subject matter of an image

The findings of this study reinforce developmental models of aesthetic understanding proposed by previous studies, which show that the principal focus of children's art interpretations is on understanding the subject matter of an image (Lin, 2004; van Meel-Jansen, 2006). Most children in the study evidence a strong concern for readily identifiable subject matter in their interpretations of the Annunciation artworks. If the subject matter of a work is abstract rather than realistic, or does not accord with the children's understanding of the Annunciation narrative in some other way, they tend to regard the work as meaningless.

5.3 Implications & recommendations of the research

This study responds to a gap in research knowledge regarding the way that children understand Christian visual artworks. Images are increasingly recognised in contemporary society as a significant mode of communicating meaning (Arizpe & Styles, 2003; Dobbs, 1998; Goldburg, 2006; 2010), and students in Australian Catholic schools need to be able to negotiate meaning making across both

linguistic and visual modes of expression (Millard & Marsh, 2001; Piro, 2002). This means that educators must expand the concept of literacy in all curriculum areas, including Religious Education, to include visual meaning making (Bamford, 2003; Callow, 2008; Williams, 2007). Despite limitations in the generalisability of the research due to the small sample size, the current study has implications for educators. The findings show the potential for encounters with Christian visual artworks to enhance children's understanding across a range of disciplines and have various implications for children in Catholic primary schools as well as related recommendations for educators:

1. Christian artworks support holistic and challenging learning

Children have an innate need to make sense of the world and their meaning making activities are facilitated by holistic interaction, that is, by sensory, affective and intellectual engagement with their environment (Frei, 1999; Whitfield, 2009). As shown in this study, children demonstrate a range of cognitive, affective and sensory interactions in their encounters with Annunciation artworks including:

- Use of specific religious vocabulary such as biblical language;
- Expression of literal scriptural comprehension;
- Expression of inferential or symbolic scriptural meanings;
- Integration of individual pictorial elements into a coherent narrative;
- Interpretation of elements of traditional Christian iconography;
- Embodiment of affective aspects of a scriptural narrative.

A significant implication for primary school educators is that the inclusion of Christian artworks as resources can assist students' interdisciplinary meaning making skills. In other words, the holistic engagement prompted by encounters with Christian artworks could enhance students' religious, visual and general literacy leading to Recommendation 1:

Recommendation 1: Christian artworks should be included regularly as resources in Catholic primary school Religious Education in order to promote holistic and academically challenging learning.

2. Christian artworks are developmentally appropriate resources

Effective pedagogy requires understanding of the psychological development of the learner as well as the organisation of relevant subject knowledge (Baumfield, 2012). Previous research regarding the development of aesthetic understanding reveals that the principal focus in most children's interpretations of an artwork is the subject matter (Parsons, 1987; van Meel-Jansen, 2006). The findings of this study support the previous research, which suggests the value of including Christian artworks as resources in primary school Religious Education. Children's typical focus on understanding the subject matter of artworks corresponds with Christian artworks' characteristic use of specific subject matter or iconography to convey layers of meaning about Christian scripture, beliefs and practice (Apostolos-Cappadona, 1995; McCarthy, 2010).

A major implication of this study is that knowledge about aesthetic characteristics should guide the choice of developmentally appropriate and productive artworks to enhance students' learning. The most appropriate Christian artworks for primary school teaching and learning will be those that offer students recognisable elements of a biblical narrative or other relevant religious education topic, rather than those with abstract or atypical representations. The use of realistic or figurative artworks, particularly those that incorporate traditional Christian iconography such as symbolic colours, gestures, poses and settings, appears to productively correspond with children's aesthetic development. Children's preferential engagement with realistic and figurative artworks indicates that these are the most productive choices for learning in primary school, as these works facilitate rich interpretations of the Christian subject matter. A recommendation of this study is:

Recommendation 2: Consideration of children's aesthetic understanding, such as the developmental preference for realistic or figurative artworks, should guide educators' selection of Christian artworks for primary school.

3. Christian artworks can encourage consideration of other viewpoints

Children in this study were invited to select artworks that they judged best to convey the scriptural narrative of the Annunciation to other children. This picture selection task presented an inherent cognitive challenge to participants, as it demanded they go beyond an individual point of view to consider the perspective of other children. The ability to hold in mind awareness of other points of view, or intersubjective awareness, is a significant milestone in aesthetic understanding, as in other areas of cognitive development. The findings of this study show that even very young primary school children are able to consider other perspectives when evaluating Christian artworks. This has implications for extending children's understanding of other viewpoints on a religious narrative or concept. In other words, shared perspectives on these artworks could support children to move beyond a limited perception to a broader and more reflective understanding. A recommendation of this study is:

Recommendation 3: Teaching strategies should involve students in sharing their interpretations of Christian artworks with peers, in order to broaden individual perspectives and facilitate reflective understanding of Christian subject matter.

5.4 Areas for further research

Few studies have been conducted to date that specifically explore children's interpretations of Christian artworks. This study has highlighted the value of providing Catholic school students with opportunities to encounter Christian visual artworks as meaning-making resources. In the light of these findings, suggestions for future research include:

- Broadening the sample size to provide greater generalisability of findings;
- Generating data through small group interviews rather than individual interviews to enable participant interaction to more authentically reflect the cooperative strategies of classroom learning environments;

- Extending the artwork selection to include more diverse religious themes and scriptural references;

- Extending the artwork selection to include more varied cultural and historic representations;

- Implementing a study that does not present participants with an informational purpose for viewing artworks. In other words, present a more open interpretive task rather than presenting participants with the task of evaluating particular Christian artworks;

- Implementing a longitudinal study that allows participants more time to form connections with visual artworks through repeated viewings and discussion.

5.5 Strengths and limitations

This study has been conducted in a particular educational context. The strengths of the study include the preservation of children's voices. An Interpretivist approach was adopted to minimise the influence of the researcher on the study situation and allow individual participant voices to be authentically heard through direct reporting of their contributions.

Another strength of the study is the way in which it highlights the richness of visual media for supporting children's expression of understanding about Christian scripture and related Religious Education knowledge. Christian artworks as learning resources are readily accessible through museum and gallery websites, and can be viewed by individuals or groups in classrooms using a range of technology.

This study offers significant findings about children's interpretations of Christian artworks. At the same time the scope of the research is necessarily limited. The restricted sample size precludes broad generalisations being made, as does the limitation of the artworks to a single biblical narrative. The findings are therefore specific to a single population, however they provide a window for further research in this area.

5.6 Research contributions

The findings of this study, whilst instigated by an interest in contributing to the sphere of Catholic religious education, also offer relevant knowledge for other educational fields. Some of the areas to which the study contributes include religious education, literacy and visual arts education as discussed below:

Religious Education

A current concern of Catholic education is the apparent decline in students' religious literacy. This concern has prompted Church leaders to call for a review of Religious Education methodologies and resources (Bishops of NSW and the ACT, 2007). The findings of this study are a timely input into the exploration of additional resources in Religious Education, as they demonstrate children's use of relevant religious language and religious concepts whilst interpreting Christian artworks. Additionally, the ready availability of Christian artworks in digital form from art galleries, museums and other institutional websites, is a practical recommendation for their use in Religious Education classrooms.

The findings also highlight the way in which encounters with Christian artworks afford insight into children's scriptural understanding. Children's characteristic attention to the subject matter of an artwork seems to facilitate their articulation of deeper and more expansive biblical understanding in the case of artworks depicting a biblical narrative. In particular, children in the study attended to a range of Christian iconographic conventions in artworks such as symbolic colours, clothing and postures. The children's responsiveness to these traditional iconographic features of Christian artworks was an inherent component of their interpretation of an artwork's meaning, and effectively supported their expression of both literal and inferential understandings of the relevant biblical narrative.

The findings of this study are a significant contribution to research in Catholic Religious Education as they suggest a potential path for primary school educators to enhance students' religious literacy through systematic encounters with scriptural artworks.

Literacy

In educational settings, literacy involves mastery of the necessary knowledge skills, behaviours and attitudes required to work successfully in contemporary society (ACARA, 2013). A particular focus within this broad literacy outcome is the concept of multiliteracy. This concept highlights the multimodal and contextual nature of contemporary communication, and the consequent requirement for students to develop awareness of the many modes and social contexts of literacy (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2010).

The findings of this study indicate that children endeavour to make sense of visual modes of meaning such as Christian artworks through a range of cognitive, affective and sensory interactions based on personal knowledge and experience. In addition to prior linguistic knowledge of the narrative of the Annunciation to Mary, the participants in the study utilised features of visual meaning such as colour, symbols and subject arrangement, in order to make sense of the artworks. They also drew on their experience and understanding of body language to construct meaningful interpretations of artworks. Younger children in particular, embodied the gestures they observed in artworks, to both inform their understanding and express their interpretation of a painting's meaning.

A further significance of the study's findings in relation to multimodal literacy is the way in which children will endeavour to integrate the recognisable elements of an artwork into a cohesive narrative in order to explain the overall meaning. This common endeavour by children across the study highlighted their use of inferential comprehension to identify relationships between individual details and link them back to knowledge of a story (NSW Department of Education and Communities, 2015).

Visual Arts

The creative arts such as visual art, drama, music and dance, play an important role in how people meaningfully interact with the world (Board of Studies, NSW, 2006). A key component of primary school Visual Arts education is

art appreciation, which involves learning how to understand visual conventions and interpret meaning from artworks. In this, as in other aspects of learning, teachers need to be mindful of cognitive development and present experiences relevant to children's developmental requirements and preferences (Board of Studies, NSW, 2006).

In this study, the strong pattern of preferences amongst research participants for realistic depictions of the Annunciation narrative supports research suggesting subject matter is a dominant concern in children's appreciation of artworks (Lin, 2004; Parsons, 1987; van Meel-Jansen, 2006). Another relevant finding for Visual Arts education is the way in which participants endeavour to integrate pictorial elements into a narrative. Most children demonstrate a variety of cognitive, affective and sensory interactions drawing from personal experience and prior knowledge of a biblical story to construct meaning. This information is relevant for Visual Arts education as it reiterates the importance of developmental and experiential considerations in art appreciation.

5.7 Concluding comments

In closing, it is fitting to return to the title of this study, which comes from the interview with six-year old Emily. The title quotes Emily's response to image No. 7 (shown at right), in which she succinctly identifies and engages with the action and emotional content of the work's subject matter:

Can you tell me what makes that one a good picture?
Emily (age 6): Well, they're both there and it's like an angel's just appeared and Mary looks kind of worried.

This particular artwork was the most popular in the study, being selected by all participants as one of their preferred images of the Annunciation. Emily's response encapsulates the way that many of the children's interpretations of the Annunciation artworks incorporated comments about the feelings of figures in the

artworks, as they noticed and occasionally embodied the postures and expressions of Mary and the angel. All the children engaged in the task of interpreting the artworks with focus and purpose. A number of children recounted later that they found it difficult to articulate their thoughts about the artworks, but they nonetheless appreciated the opportunity to express their opinions.

I would like to acknowledge the contribution of each participant in the study. As I continue to reflect on their responses to the Annunciation artworks and committed participation in the research, I realise the depth of insight I have gained as a result of the children's input. Their meaningful perceptions into the Annunciation narrative and artworks have given insights into the depth of children's interpretation of Christian artworks, as well as emphasising the value of further research in this field.

P. & J. Limbourg – *Annunciation (detail),*
(ca. 1405 -1409)

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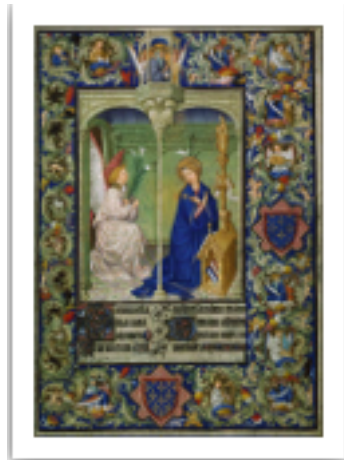
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Study image No. 1

P. & J. LIMBOURG - Manuscript illumination (ca. 1405 -1409)

Source: https://en.wikipedia. org/wiki/Belles_Heures_of_ Jean_de_France,_Duc_de_ Berry

Study image No. 2

TATIANA GRANT - Icon of the Annunciation (late 20th cent.)

Source: http://spiritualpaintings.com /files/annunciation.1.html

Study image No. 3

FRA ANGELICO - Annunciation (1433-34)

Source: http//www.wga.hu

Study image No. 4

FRA FILIPPO LIPPI - Annunciation with Kneeling Donors (ca. 1440)

Source: http//www.wga.hu
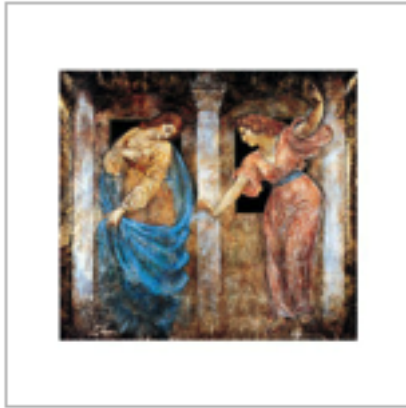
Study image No. 5	Study image No. 6
RICHARD FRANKLIN - Annunciation IV (ca. 1990)	**PETER PAUL RUBENS - Annunciation (1609-10)**
Source: http://arttocanvas.com /art/figurative/annunciation-iv/	Source: http//www.wga.hu
Study image No. 7	Study image No. 8
WILLIAM BRASSEY HOLE - Annunciation (ca. 1890)	**NICOLAS GHIKA– Annunciation (mid-late 20th C)**
Source: http://www.marysrosaries.com /collaboration/images/b/b6/ Annunciation-032.jpg	Source: http://www.artnet.com/artists/nicolas-ghika/the-annunciation-5v9OAvkfTtzzaQYdptBXiw2

Study image No. 9

CHRISTINA YAMBEING – Annunciation (1993)

Source: http://merrepenarts.com.au/ gallery/index.php?album=greeting- cards/greeting-cards&image=yamba- annunciation-edited.jpg

Study image No. 10

JOHN COLLIER - Annunciation (2000)

Source: http://www.mcgillcatholics.ca/ 2015/03/25/lenten-reflections-the- annunciation/

Study image No. 11

HE QI – Annunciation (2001)

Source: http://www.heqiart.com/store/c1 /Featured_Products.html

Study image No. 12

CHRISTINA SAJ – Annunciation (ca. 2000)

Source: http://www.christinasaj.com /angels-shepherds-kings/

Appendix B: Australian Catholic University
Human Research Ethics Committee Approval

7.2   Ref: HREC NO: 2014 277N
CI: Prof Peta Goldburg
SI: Ms Joanne Toohey (PhD student)
        TITLE: Art and religious education: An exploration of children's
        interpretations of Christian artworks within the context of an Australian
        Catholic primary school

The Committee discussed the above application and agreed that it was an exemplary application that had been clearly explained. The Committee made the following minor comments:

a)   clarification should be provided as to whether the researcher and child would remain visible at all times during the conduct of the research;

RESPONSE: It is intended that the researcher and child will remain visible at all times during the conduct of the research. An amendment to the Research Design at item B.1.1. is proposed, adding in a phrase to read 'The interviews will be conducted by the researcher within a school space, separate from the classroom, as designated by the school administration to ensure that the researcher and child will remain visible at all times during the conduct of the research.'

b)   the language of the assent for children should be more age appropriate;

RESPONSE: The language used in the assent for children has been altered so that it is more age appropriate. An amended Consent Form has been uploaded.

c)   participant information material should be on appropriate letterhead;

RESPONSE: The Participant Information Sheet has been placed on ACU letterhead. The amended form has been uploaded.

d)   the contact details on the Participant Information Sheet in the event of complaints or concerns about the conduct of the project should be amended to:
        Research Ethics Manager (ResEthics.Manager@acu.edu.au)
        Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research)
        Australian Catholic University
        North Sydney Campus
        PO Box 968
        North Sydney NSW 2059.

RESPONSE: The contact details on the Participant Information Sheet required in the event of complaints or concerns about the conduct of the project have been amended as per above information. These can be seen on the amended form uploaded.

e)   evidence of a current Working With Children Check should be provided;

RESPONSE: WWC0547614V (Valid to 02/12/2019)

f)   evidence of approval from Parramatta CEO should be provided, when obtained.

RESPONSE: The application for approval from the Parramatta CEO is pending and will be forwarded to the ACU HREC when obtained.

Catholic Education
Diocese of Parramatta

Ms Joanne Toohey
St Thomas Aquinas Primary School
PO Box 199
Springwood NSW 2777

11 December 2014

Dear Joanne

Thank you for your Application to Conduct Research in Parramatta Diocese which we received on 02/12/2014. We have now reviewed your Ethics approval. I am happy for you to approach St Thomas Aquinas Primary - Springwood in order to carry out research on 'Art and Religious Education: An exploration of children's interpretations of Christian artworks within the context of an Australian Catholic Primary School.

We always stress the following points in relation to research requests:

- It is the school principal, Mr Sergio Rosato who gives final permission for research to be carried out in his school.

- Confidentiality needs to be observed in reporting and must comply with the requirements of the Commonwealth *Privacy Amendment (Private Sector) Act 2000.*

- There should be some feedback to schools and a copy of the findings of the research forwarded to this office.

- This letter of approval should accompany any approach to schools.

I look forward to the results of this study and wish you the best over the coming months. If you would like to discuss any aspect of this research in our diocese, please do not hesitate to contact me on 02 9407 7023 or pbarrett@parra.catholic.edu.au .

Yours sincerely

Mr Patrick Barrett
Manager of Programs (Special Purpose)
Catholic Education Office
Diocese of Parramatta

RESEARCH PROJECT: Art and Religious Education: Exploring children's interpretations of Christian art.

RESEARCHER: Joanne Toohey

What is the project about?
This research project seeks to investigate Catholic primary school students' interpretations of biblical artworks or visual representations of scripture. This is a small-scale project that has arisen from my teaching experience within the Catholic education system. It involves a total sample of twelve primary school students of a variety of ages. The research will form the basis of a thesis for the degree of Master of Education (Research).

What is this topic important?
Contemporary education recognises images as an increasingly important form of communication. In Religious Education, biblical art can be an effective complement to the written text. Little, however, is known about how children infer meaning from or 'read' religious images. Knowledge about this process is important for the development of strategies to enhance the Religious Education learning opportunities of all students, and to foster the growth of religious literacy.

Who is undertaking the project?
This project is being conducted by Joanne Toohey under the supervision of Professor Peta Goldburg and Dr Rosemary Richards from the Australian Catholic University.

What will participants be asked to do?
The researcher will individually interview a total of twelve students. Each participant will be asked to listen to a Christian scripture passage and to respond to a number of open-ended questions about what they recognise in corresponding Christian artworks. The interviews will be audiotaped using a digital voice recorder. There will be no video recording or photographing of participants. There will be no written responses required from participants. Each interview will be of 20 – 30 minutes duration and will take place at school during regular school hours.

What are the benefits of the research project?
There are a number of potential benefits arising from the research project. Firstly, for the individual participant, there is a potential learning benefit as the interview provides an opportunity reflect on a scripture passage and related religious education concepts. Potential benefits for the broader educational community include extending understanding of strategies for exploring Christian scripture in Religious Education. Knowledge about children's interpretation of images is also of more general pedagogical interest since visual literacy, as highlighted in the new Australian Curriculum, pertains to all subject areas in contemporary education.

Are there any risks associated with participating in this project?
There are no anticipated risks to participants as a result of involvement in this research. The subject matter of the interviews concerns Christian artworks and scripture. This content is consistent with material encountered in Catholic Religious Education. The duration of the interview is comparable to regular classroom activities. In the unexpected event of a participant demonstrating any form of discomfort the researcher will conclude the interview and inform relevant school personnel.

How much time will the project take?
Each participant will take part in a single interview session of 20 - 30 minutes duration. The entire project will be conducted within the school over a time frame of 4 – 6 weeks in the Term 1, 2015.

Participant consent
Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Potential participants will receive an information letter and parental permission form. This form entails both parental consent and participant assent. Individuals are not obliged to participate, and even after indicating assent, may withdraw from the study at any time without adverse consequences.

Will anyone else know the results of the project?
Throughout the research project attention will be given to maintaining participant privacy, and confidentiality of the data collected. No photographs or video recording of participants will be used. A pseudonym will replace participant names in the transcripts. The identity of individual participants and the study site will not be disclosed in any reports arising from the research. The results of this study will be published within an Australian Catholic University thesis for the award of Master of Education (Research) and may be reported on in education academic journals, conferences and associated forums. Whilst every effort will be made to maintain participant anonymity during the data collection phase it is acknowledged that the small sample size and the nature of the setting means that this cannot be guaranteed.

Will participants be able to find out the results of the project?
A summary of the results of this project will be made available to the school principal and to all interested participants.

Complaints or concerns?
The study has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Australian Catholic University (approval number 2014 277N). If you have any complaints or concerns about the conduct of the project, you may write to the Research Ethics Manager as follows. Any complaint or concern will be treated in confidence and fully investigated. You will be informed of the outcome.

Research Ethics Manager, (ResEthics.Manager@acu.edu.au)
Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research)
Australian Catholic University
North Sydney Campus
PO Box 968
North Sydney NSW 2059

Further information about the project
If you have any questions about the project please contact me in person, by phone 0404 486 013, or email jjtooh001@myacu.edu.au

RESEARCH PROJECT: Art and Religious Education: Exploring children's interpretations of Christian art.

PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR: Professor Peta Goldburg
CO-SUPERVISOR: Dr Rosemary Richards
STUDENT RESEARCHER: Joanne Toohey
STUDENT'S DEGREE: Master of Education (Research)

Dear Parent/Caregiver,

Your son/daughter in Year __ is invited to participate in the research project described below with your consent.

What is the project about?
The research project investigates Catholic primary school students' interpretations of religious artworks or visual representations of scripture. This is a small-scale project that has arisen from the researcher's teaching experience within the Catholic education system. The research will form the basis of a thesis for the degree of Master of Education (Research).

Who is undertaking the project?
Joanne Toohey, a teacher currently employed within the Parramatta Catholic education system, is conducting this project. The research will form the basis for the degree of Master of Education (Research) at Australian Catholic University under the supervision of Professor Peta Goldburg and Dr Rosemary Richards.

Are there any risks associated with participating in this project?
There are no anticipated risks to participants as a result of involvement in this research. The subject matter of the interviews concerns Christian artworks and scripture. This content is consistent with material encountered in Catholic Religious Education. The duration of the interview is comparable to regular classroom activities. In the unexpected event of a participant demonstrating any form of discomfort the researcher will conclude the interview and inform relevant school personnel.

What will participants be asked to do?
The researcher will interview each participant individually. Each participant will be asked to listen to a Christian scripture passage and respond to a number of open-ended questions about what they recognise in corresponding Christian artworks. There will be no written responses required from participants. Participants will be able to ask questions to clarify any aspect of the task. The interview will take place at school during regular school hours and will involve digital voice recording. There will be no video recording or photographing of participants.

How much time will the project take?
Each participant will take part in a single interview session of 20 - 30 minutes duration. The entire project will be conducted within the school over a time frame of 4 - 6 weeks within Term 1, 2015.

What are the benefits of the research project?
There are a number of potential benefits arising from the research project. Firstly, for the individual participant, there is a potential learning benefit as the interview provides an opportunity to consider relevant religious education concepts. Potential benefits for

the broader educational community include extending understanding of strategies for exploring Christian scripture in Religious Education. Knowledge about of children's interpretation of images is also of more general pedagogical interest since visual literacy, as highlighted in the new Australian Curriculum, pertains to all subject areas in contemporary education.

Can I withdraw from the study?
Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are not under any obligation to participate. If you agree to participate, you can withdraw from the study at any time without adverse consequences.

Will anyone else know the results of the project?
Throughout the research project attention will be given to maintaining participant privacy, and confidentiality of the data collected. No photographs or video recording of participants will occur. A pseudonym will replace participant names in the transcripts. The identity of individual participants and the study site will not be disclosed in reports arising from the research. The results of this study will be published within an Australian Catholic University thesis for the award of Master of Education (Research) and may be reported on in education academic journals, conferences and associated forums. Whilst every effort will be made to maintain participant anonymity it is acknowledged that the small sample size means that this cannot be guaranteed.

Will I be able to find out the results of the project?
A summary of the results of this project will be made available to the school principal and to all interested participants. Please indicate your interest on the participant consent form.

Who do I contact if I have questions about the project?
If you have any questions in relation to the project please contact the researcher, Joanne Toohey by email jjtooh001@myacu.edu.au or by letter c/o St Thomas Aquinas School.

What if I have a complaint or any concerns?
The study has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Australian Catholic University (approval number 2014 277N). If you have any complaints or concerns about the conduct of the project, you may write to Research Ethics Manager as follows. Any complaint or concern will be treated in confidence and fully investigated. You will be informed of the outcome.

Research Ethics Manager, (ResEthics.Manager@acu.edu.au)
Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research)
Australian Catholic University
North Sydney Campus
PO Box 968
North Sydney NSW 2059

If your son/daughter wishes to participate, please sign and return both copies of the enclosed consent form in the pre-addressed envelope provided.

Yours sincerely,

Joanne Toohey

PARENT/GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM

PROJECT TITLE: Art and Religious Education: Exploring children's interpretations of Christian art.

PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR: Professor Peta Goldburg   CO-SUPERVISOR: Dr Rosemary Richards
STUDENT RESEARCHER: Joanne Toohey

I .... (*the parent/guardian*) have read and understood the information provided in the Research Participant Information Letter. Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree that my child, nominated below, may participate in this activity. I understand that my child will participate in an interview of 20-30 minutes duration, about Christian art and scripture. I understand that the interview will be recorded with a digital audio recorder and that I can withdraw my consent at any time without adverse consequences. I agree that research data collected for the study may be published or may be provided to other researchers in a form that does not identify my child in any way. I would/would not be interested in receiving a copy of the summary of results for this project when available.

NAME OF PARENT/GUARDIAN: ....……………………….…

SIGNATURE ....….………………….……   DATE:

NAME OF CHILD ....………………………

ASSENT OF CHILD PARTICIPANT

I …………………………………….… (*the participant*) understand what this research project is about, and my parent/guardian has explained to me what will happen. I am happy to take part in an interview, lasting about half-an-hour, about Bible stories and pictures. I know that what I say will be recorded with a voice recorder. I know that I can change my mind at any time about being interviewed and I don't have to say why.

MY NAME IS …………………………………………………………………………………

* SUPERVISOR:

Peta Goldburg.

• STUDENT RESEARCHER
• DATE: 26/2/2015

Introduction

Good morning/afternoon _____. Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed by me today. I'm trying to find out what children like you think about paintings of Bible stories. It's for my university research project. I'm going to record what we talk about today so that I can listen to it again later. Does that sound ok?

****** Start audio recording*******

So, this is what will happen....
*First I am going to ask you to **listen** to a Bible story. After that I am going to ask you to **look** at some paintings and to **talk** about the ones you think are best. By the way, there are no right or wrong choices. At the end we can take a photo of the pictures you choose. You can ask me questions whenever you like.*
Does that sound ok? Do you have any questions at the moment?

Ascertaining prior knowledge

Have you ever heard the Bible story about an angel bringing news to Mary that she was to have a baby? It is sometimes called 'The Annunciation'.
Yes – can you please tell me some things you remember about it?
No – that's ok.

Reading the passage Luke 1:26-35

*Now I'd like you to **listen** to the story of the Annunciation to help you remember/know about what happens, and then we'll **look** at some pictures of that story.*

Introducing the picture selection task
Now I want you to imagine that you are a teacher and you are trying to teach other children this story of the Annunciation using pictures as well as a Bible.

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Could you please look at these paintings and choose three that you think would be best or most helpful to teach other children this story? Remember, you are the teacher and whatever you choose is ok.

<u>During picture selection task</u>

Why did you choose this picture?

What is the picture about? What do you see that makes you say that?

What else can you see in the picture? What do you wonder about the picture?

<u>Probes:</u>

You said X. What do you mean by that?

Can you give me an example? Whereabouts in the painting do you see that?

Can you say more about that?

E.g. 'You said that this one was 'nice'. What do you mean by 'nice'?

You said this one was 'no good'. Can you tell me why? What do you see that makes you say that?

<u>After selection is complete, pin the pictures onto board:</u>

Are there any changes that you would like to make?

Would you like to take the photo for me?

<u>Concluding the interview</u>

Thank you for your help today. I've learnt a lot from listening to you.

I'd like you to choose one of these other pictures as a thank you token.

****** Stop audio recording*******

<u>Escort student back to class.</u>

The Annunciation to Mary - Luke 1:26-38

God sent the angel Gabriel to the town of Nazareth in Galilee with a message for a virgin named Mary.

She was engaged to Joseph from the family of King David. The angel greeted Mary and said, "You are truly blessed! The Lord is with you."

Mary was confused by the angel's words and wondered what they meant.

Then the angel told Mary, "Don't be afraid! God is pleased with you, and you will have a son. His name will be Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of God Most High. The Lord God will make him king, as his ancestor David was. He will rule the people of Israel forever, and his kingdom will never end."

Mary asked the angel, "How can this happen? I am not married!"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come down to you, and God's power will come over you. So your child will be called the holy Son of God.

"Your relative Elizabeth is also going to have a son, even though she is old. No one thought she could ever have a baby, but in three months she will have a son. Nothing is impossible for God!"

Mary said, "I am the Lord's servant! Let it happen as you have said."

And the angel left her.

Lily (age 9) – Interview recorded Tuesday 17/03/15

Researcher = *italic font*   Participant = regular font
CAPITALISED TEXT = Researcher commentary/explanation
….. Ellipses indicate prompts, such as echoing the participant's comments, have
been omitted from the transcription to maintain flow of participant response.

AS PER THE INTERVIEW SCRIPT, THE CONVERSATION BEGINS WITH THE RESEARCHER
INTRODUCTION TO PARTICIPANT AND OUTLINE OF THE INTERVIEW PROCESS., FOLLOWED
BY ASCERTAINING PARTICIPANT'S PRIOR KNOWLEDGE OF THE FOCUS SCRIPTURE EXCERPT.

Have you ever heard the Bible story about an angel bringing news to Mary that
she was to have a baby? It is sometimes called 'The Annunciation'.
(If 'Yes') – can you please tell me some things you remember about it?

Yes – well Mary was in her backyard I think and Gabriel came down and told her
she was going have a baby and she has to name her, I mean him, Jesus. And
Mary told Joseph about it and they went to Jerusalem.

AS PER THE INTERVIEW SCRIPT, THE RESEARCHER READS ALOUD THE PASSAGE LUKE 1:26-
35 THEN SETS UP THE PICTURE SELECTION TASK.
THE PARTICIPANT STARTS TO SORT THE PICTURES INTO GROUPS – HELPFUL OR NOT
HELPFUL

What are you looking for to help you make your choice?
Well, ones that you can see that the angel has come and, um,
you can see clearly, so, like this one (indicates No. 12) you can't
really see what the picture is that much.

Is there anything else that you are looking for in the picture?
Um, where, um (LONG PAUSE – SEEMS VERY UNCERTAIN)

Would it be easier to have a 'maybe' pile as well?
PARTICIPANT AGREES AND RESUMES SORTING PICTURES SILENTLY, NOW INTO THE THREE
CATEGORIES – HELPFUL/MAYBE HELPFUL/ NOT HELPFUL. RESEARCHER SUGGESTS
PARTICIPANT NOW FOCUS ON THE 'MOST HELPFUL' GROUP AND CHOOSE
THE BEST PICTURE.

Well, I'd probably pick this one as the best one (INDICATES NO.7)
…she's inside…the angel actually looks like it's something real
'cause see how that's like got wings (INDICATES PICTURE NO.3,
ALSO FROM THE MOST HELPFUL GROUP), I think that that angel
(REFERRING BACK NOW TO NO. 7) looks more like it's from
heaven…it's wearing white and it's sort of glowing.

RESEARCHER MOVES THE DISCUSSION TO ANOTHER SELECTED

Why would this image (No. 3) be helpful?
Well, um, you can see, um, that's there's been put, um,
little words there and you can see that it's talking to
Mary… and Mary's thinking by her hands, um, thinking
'how is this going to happen?'

Can you tell me more about her (Mary's) hands?
Well, she's probably thinking how is this going to happen? I'm so blessed for an
angel to come down and talk to me….
Is there anything else you can see in the picture?
Well there's, I think it's a little dove there.

Ok. Is that important in the picture?
Yes. Cause, the dove is….(pause), um. Is it the sign of peace? I forgot what it
means.

RESEARCHER MOVES DISCUSSION TO OTHER PICTURES IN THE 'MOST HELPFUL' GROUP.
*Can you tell me about this picture (No. 10)? Why have you
chosen this picture?*
Um, I like this picture 'cos (pause), it looks more, well it
shows that she's young, um and that (pause), yeah, it shows
that she's young and (long pause)

What makes you say that she's young?
Well, she's smaller and she's wearing a like teenagey dress and shoes, (pause)

Is there anything else that you like about that picture (No. 10)?
I like, like the surrounding – the houses.

What does that make you think of – the surrounding?
Well, it's more, um…um…realistic…like it looks more real

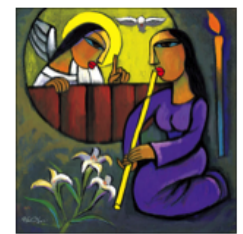*So, real like you might see it? Or real like that's Mary's house?*
Real like you might see it. Yeah.

RESEARCHER MOVES DISCUSSION TO NO. 11 – ALSO IN 'MOST HELPFUL' GROUP.
Why do you think that this one would be a helpful picture?
Well, I mostly chose this one 'cos um there was a dove in it.
Um, and… how I don't…oh…there is… well it, I like how
they've drawn it – they've actually drawn it not painted it.

What shows you that it's drawn not painted?

Well, the faces are a bit different um to the other pictures um,
(pause) oh she's come in, Mary's in her house and she's come in through the
window…Gabriel has come in through the window and I thought that was a
good idea.

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RESEARCHER RETURNS DISCUSSION TO NO. 7, EARLIER IDENTIFIED AS THE
BEST PICTURE…

What do you think the feeling in this picture is?
Well Mary looks a little bit scared…and, um, Gabriel thinks - is
thinking there's no need to be scared – I've come to give you a
good message.

And, is that same feeling in any of the other one's you've picked?
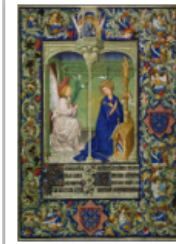Um, no, not really?

So, Mary has a different feeling in the other pictures?　　Yeah.
RESEARCHER MOVES DISCUSSION TO IMAGES IN THE 'NOT HELPFUL' GROUP.

*What about No. 1 – you said that might not be helpful. Why do you
think that?*
Well, Mary - the angel Gabriel, is coming to Mary's house and Mary
doesn't look that surprised – she doesn't have any expression that
much.

You mean on her face?
Yeah.

*Well let's go along to another one you said is probably not so
good – No. 5. Why is that one not so good?*
Well, it's not very clear who the angel is and who, um, Mary
is….'cos you can't see – they look like they're dancing sort of.

*Alright, let's go to the reason for the next one – No. 9. Why do you
think that one is not so helpful?*

Well, it doesn't really look like – it sort of looks like – two people
maybe – it sort of looks Aboriginal – like an aboriginal picture.
It's got like all different weird things. It's got, by the looks of it, a
worm and some sort of thing (?).

So that wouldn't help?　　No, I don't think.

*R: And you've got one more in your pile of 'not helpful' – No. 4.
Why do you think that one's not so helpful?*

Well, um, there wasn't anyone else while um, the angel was,
um, talking to Mary – 'cos there's two other people there and,
um, well it looks like it's in a church and I don't think, um,
Gabriel, came, um, in a church.

PARTICPANT PUTS FINAL SELECTION ON PIN BOARD FOR PHOTO AND
RESEARCHER CONCLUDES THE INTERVIEW.

Lily (age 9)

CODES	TRANSCRIPT
SUBJECT CLARITY	*What are you looking for to help you make your choice?* Well, <u>ones that you can see that the angel has come and, um, you can see clearly,</u> so, like this one (indicates No. 12) you can't really see what the picture is that much. *Is there anything else that you are looking for in the picture?* Um, where, um *Would it be easier to have a 'maybe' pile as well?*
ANGEL CHARACTERISTICS	Well, I'd probably pick this one as the best one (INDICATES NO.7) …she's inside…<u>the angel actually looks like it's something real 'cause see how that's like got wings (INDICATES PICTURE NO.3), I think that that angel (REFERRING BACK NOW TO NO. 7) looks more like it's from heaven…it's wearing white and it's sort of glowing.</u>
INTEGRATING NARRATIVE ELEMENTS	*Why would this image (No. 3) be helpful?* Well, um, you can see, um, that's there's been put um little words there and <u>you can see that it's talking to Mary… and Mary's thinking by her hands, um, thinking how is this going to happen</u>?
MARY - GESTURE MARY - FEELINGS	*Can you tell me more about her (Mary's) hands?* Well, she's probably thinking how is this going to happen? <u>I'm so blessed</u> for an angel to come down and talk to me….
CHRISTIAN SYMBOL	*Is there anything else you can see in the picture?* Well there's, I think it's a little dove there. *Ok. Is that important in the picture?* Yes. Cause, <u>the dove is….(pause), um. Is it the sign of peace</u>? I forgot what it means.
MARY CHARACTERISTICS	*Can you tell me about this picture (No. 10)? Why have you chosen this picture?* Um, I like this picture 'cos (pause), <u>it looks more, well it shows that she's young,</u> um and that (pause), yeah, it shows that she's young and (long pause) *What makes you say that she's young?* Well, she's smaller and she's wearing a like teenagey dress and shoes, um
SUBJECT MATTER _ REALISM	*Is there anything else that you like about that picture (No. 10)?* I like, like the surrounding – the houses.

	What does that make you think of – the surrounding? Well, <u>it's more, um…um…realistic…like it looks more real</u>
	So, real like you might see it? Or real like that's Mary's house? Real like you might see it. Yeah.
CHRISTIAN SYMBOL	*Why do you think that this one (NO. 11) would be a helpful picture?* Well, <u>I mostly chose this one 'cos um there was a dove in</u> it. Um, and… how I don't…oh…there is… well it, <u>I like how they've drawn it – they've actually drawn it not painted it.</u>
INTEGRATING NARRATIVE ELEMENTS	*What shows you that it's drawn not painted?* Well, the faces are a bit different um to the other pictures um, (pause) <u>oh she's come in, Mary's in her house and she's come in through the window…Gabriel has come in through the window and I thought that was a good idea.</u>
MARY - FEELINGS GABRIEL - FEELINGS	*What do you think the feeling in this picture is?* <u>Well Mary looks a little bit scared</u>…and, um, <u>Gabriel thinks - is thinking there's no need to be scared – I've come to give you a good message.</u>
	And, is that same feeling in any of the other one's you've picked? Um, no, not really? *So, Mary has a different feeling in the other pictures?* Yeah.
MARY - FEELINGS	*What about No. 1 – you said that might not be helpful. Why do you think that?* Well, Mary - <u>the angel Gabriel, is coming to Mary's house and Mary doesn't look that surprised – she doesn't have any expression that much.</u> *You mean on her face?* Yeah.
SUBJECT MATTER _ CLARITY	*No. 5. Why is that one not so good?* Well, <u>it's not very clear who the angel is and who, um, Mary is</u>….'cos you can't see – they look like they're dancing sort of.
SUBJECT MATTER _ CLARITY	*No. 9. Why do you think that one is not so helpful?* Well, <u>it doesn't really look like – it sort of looks like – two people maybe –</u> it sort of looks Aboriginal – like an aboriginal picture. It's got like all different weird things. It's got, by the looks of it, a worm and some sort of thing (?).
	So that wouldn't help? No, I don't think.
ABOUT SCRIPTURE – INTEGRATING ELEMENTS	*No. 4. Why do you think that one's not so helpful?* Well, um, <u>there wasn't anyone else while um, the angel was, um, talking to Mary – 'cos there's two other people there and, um, well it looks like it's in a church and I don't think, um, Gabriel, came, um, in a church.</u>

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Thematic grouping (9 year olds) – Christian understanding codes

	UNDERSTANDING DEMONSTRATED IN RESPONSE TO ANNUNCIATION PAINTINGS			
PRIOR KNOWL. OF ANNUN. NARR'VE	WHAT THE PAINTING IS ABOUT (Iconographic date/ Listing/ integrating elements)	ABOUT MARY (Clothing, posture, expression)	ABOUT GABRIEL (Clothing, posture)	ABOUT CHRISTIANITY (Symbols, traditions)
Jack (age 9) Um, Joseph had a dream that night that an angel came and then, that day, um, the angel came to Mary and said, um, I can't believe every w– I can't forget every word – Oh! – Remember, every word but it's practically they say something about you will have a baby. He will be God's son and you will – you are to name him Jesus. So, yeah, and then Mary doesn't, um, know what to say and then she	**Jack (age 9)** Mary's kneeling down to Jos- to the angel Gabriel and she's like she's probably shocked but she's also thinking, like thanking God and you can see that because she's kneeling down and she's like really thanking the angel. And I don't know if he's giving her the flower or she's giving him the flower…… Um, there's two men watching. I'm not quite sure who they are but they might be – one of them might be Joseph. One of them could be (pause) I don't know who the other one is. the angel's just saying like 'Don't worry' and Mary's like, she's had a Bible on her lap and she's just crossing her arms like that which might be a sign of – um, I don't know – just thanksgiving or something. And the angel's like, yeah just kneeling down and Mary's just looking up like confused but she's probably thinking 'Wow. This is amazing'. 'cos the Holy Spirit has- is the dove and, it came down, and because and because the angel said that um the angel said that the Holy Spirit would come even though she's not married and it would let her have a baby. And you can see that it's come and it's um yeah it's just gone over her to say that she's getting it and she's just she's – Mary just looks really like just looks really thankful but confused.	**Jack (age 9)** the look on Mary's face, is like a bit confused and maybe a bit scared she's like, um, her body is like kinda turned away so she could be a bit scared but she's also like kinda got that look on her face – she just looks really confused. um, there's a scroll with something on it – I don't know what it is but it might be like a Bible or something. So it could tell – it could show that, um, she was really Catholic. Mary's probably a bit shocked and scared maybe – frightened. Mary's kneeling down to Jos- to the angel Gabriel and she's like, she's probably shocked but she's also thinking, like thanking God Mary was really Catholic so um you would think they would like kneel to the angel.	**Jack (age 9)** And the angel's like just relaxed and just got his hands together .. and just um just like knows what to say and that. Thinking just plain really. The, um, angel's like – looks a bit, um, sad but, or not sad but she– he wouldn't probably be sad. It just looks like he might just be thinking 'Why she's? I thought she would – if you would go to any other person they would probably just go, 'Yep, alright. I'll take it. Thank you'. I saw the	**Jack (age 9)** there's a scroll with something on it – I don't know what it is but it might be like a Bible or something. So it could tell – it could show that, um, she was really Catholic. she's probably shocked but she's also thinking, like thanking God and you can see that because she's kneeling down and she's like really thanking the angel. I also like how there's the bird up there I don't know what it means but, just, might be – Oh! I know! It's the Holy Spirit, I think. .'cos the Holy Spirit has- is the dove

just says ok. (Pause) After that I forgot.	you wouldn't think that they would be dancing if they, um, had just said, just said – Mary wouldn't be dancing if she just got the, she, the message from the angel. Like she could but, 'cos she was shocked and, um, a bit confused. Yeah, it doesn't really tell you that she's happy so, in this picture it is saying that. Mary's like holding her head back and just looks really confused and like just not normal. And then the angel's just like sitting there and his mouth's a bit open so you can tell that the angel's speaking.	it just makes more sense for Mary to have that look rather than the angel.	wings on the kneeling person the angel said that the Holy Spirit would come, even though she's not married, and it would let her have a baby	
Alex (age 9) I don't really remember that much. *Do you remember who was in the story?* Mary and Joephus (sic) and angel	**Alex (age 9)** there's like an angel there and Mary's looking at it and, um, and she's praying. …. it's like all many pictures around it and like an angel. It's like a Bible a bit. It's like a Bible. And Mary and the angel. There's like birds down here (pause), and pictures… there's like a church here and um, (pause), um, it's like a Bible. Mary's there and there's like a piece of paper and she has something in her hand, there.	**Alex (age 9)** Mary's looking at it and, um, and she's praying. she has something in her hand, there.	**Alex (age 9)** The light around the angel	**Alex (age 9)** Mary's looking at it and, um, and she's praying. there's like a church here and um (pause) um it's like a Bible.
Lily (age 9) Yes – well Mary was in her backyard I think and Gabriel came down and told her she was going have a baby and she has to name her, I mean him, Jesus. And Mary	**Lily (age 9)** you can see, um, that's there's been put, um, little words there and you can see that it's talking to Mary… and Mary's thinking by her hands, um, thinking 'how is this going to happen?' …..I'm so blessed for an angel to come down and talk to me. I mostly chose this one 'cos um there was a dove in it. .. oh she's come in, Mary's in her house and she's come in through the window…Gabriel has come in through the window and I thought that was a good idea.	**Lily (age 9)** Mary's thinking by her hands um thinking how is this going to happen? …..I'm so blessed for an angel to come down and talk to me Mary looks a little bit scared	**Lily (age 9)** The angel actually looks like its something real…..I think that angel looks more like it's from heaven. It's wearing white and it's sort of glowing Gabriel thinks - is thinking there's no need to be	**Lily (age 9)** I think it's a little dove there …the dove is (pause) um - Is it the sign of peace? I forgot what it means. I don't think, um, Gabriel, came um in a church.

told Joseph about it and they went to Jerusalem. **Hannah (age 9)** Well, she had to – well after that she went to tell Elizabeth and, um, like it was a long time ago so.	Mary looks a little bit scared…and, um, Gabriel thinks - is thinking there's no need to be scared – I've come to give you a good message. there wasn't anyone else while um the angel was um talking to Mary – 'cos there's two other people there and um well it looks like it's in a church and I don't think um Gabriel came um in a church. **Hannah (age 9)** Maybe like Mary praying or reading a book or something and maybe the angel Gabriel like. it kind of like shows how she's telling her that she's like got a– having a baby and how she's like saying – trying to say like 'how does that mean'? That she was reading a book before she – while the angel Gabriel came to see her…..she's sitting down and she's got a book on her lap and yeah…..Um, she's sitting, um like in her backyard or something like that or like just looking at the garden. And um there's the dove? And Mary was praying and then the angel came in and told her….	**Hannah (age 9)** Maybe like Mary praying or reading a book or something Maybe like, 'It can't be me'. Or, it's so good or something. It's in her heart. … Or how can it be me? or something. She was reading a book before she – while the angel Gabriel came to see her…..she's sitting down and she's got a book on her lap. ..She's sitting, um, like in her backyard or something like that or like just looking at the garden she's blessed and she's like (pause) happy that it's like her she was praying and it looks like she was like reading a script or something. And, yeah, she's like listening to the angel 'cos she's face - eye contact with her that she's blessed and she's happy to learn that she's having a baby	scared – I've come to give you a good message. **Hannah (age 9)** that looks like an angel because it's got like all the light around it. it kinda looks like she's just appeared cos the light is around her.	**Hannah (age 9)** she's kind of praying while she's telling her And, um, there's the dove?

Thematic grouping (9 year olds) – Aesthetic understanding codes

ATTRACTION colour/ beauty/light/	SUBJECT MATTER clarity/realism/correspondence to scripture/detail	EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION (feelings, gestures, facial expression)
Jack (age 9) you can't really see what they're doing like and when I first saw it I couldn't even see the sh- the body – the shape of their body. I could just see colour patches. And yeah – that's like really realistic. …. Just the colours.	**Jack (age 9)** – it clearly shows which one's Mary and which one's the angel. – Um it's like you can see the emotion on their face 'cos the um angel's like – looks a bit um sad but or not sad but she– he wouldn't probably be sad. It just looks like he might just be thinking Why she's? I thought she would – if you would go to any other person they would probably just go, Yep, alright. I'll take it. Thank you. But she might be - she's like kneeling down and just. – Yeah, and um – Oh! Is that the angel? Oh! I got confused. I thought that was the angel (*points to standing figure on right*)…. 'Cos Mary was really Catholic so, um, you would think they would like kneel to the angel. (*And what's changing your mind now?)* 'Cos I saw the wings on the kneeling person. And I can just – it just makes more sense for Mary to have that look rather than the angel. – you can tell, like, what they're doing (*in a good picture*) – the angel's just saying like 'Don't worry' and Mary's like, she's had a Bible on her lap and she's just crossing her arms like that (*crosses arms across chest to demonstrate*) which might be a sign of – um, I don't know – just thanksgiving or something. And the angel's like yeah just kneeling down and Mary's just looking up like confused but she's probably thinking 'Wow this is amazing'. And you can see that by her face, she's like (*demonstrates surprised facial expression*) – I also like how there's the bird up there . I don't know what it means but, just, might be – Oh! I know! It's the Holy Spirit, I think. I think, the Holy Spirit…..'cos the Holy Spirit has- is the dove and, it came down, and because, and because the angel said that, um, the angel said that the Holy Spirit would come, even though she's not married, and it would let her have a baby. And you can see that it's come and it's um yeah it's just gone over her to say that she's getting it and she's just she's – Mary just looks really like just looks really thankful but confused. – you can't really see what they're doing like and when I first saw it I couldn't even see the sh- the body – the shape of their body. I could just see colour patches. I can see them now, but, it's just a bit hard to understand, for my age – to me it looks like they're dancing – you can probably tell that they're not but, like, the first	**Jack (age 9)** – the look on Mary's face, is like a bit confused and maybe a bit scared. And the angel's like just relaxed and just got his hands together. – she's like, um, her body is like kinda turned away so she could be a bit scared but she's also like kinda got that look on her face – she just looks really confused. – Mary's kneeling down to Jos- to the angel Gabriel and she's like she's probably shocked but she's also thinking, like thanking God and you can see that because she's kneeling down and she's like really thanking the angel. – Um it's like you can see the emotion on their face 'cos the um angel's like – looks a bit um sad but or not sad but she– he wouldn't probably be sad. It just looks like he might just be thinking Why she's? I thought she would – if you would go to any other person they would probably just go, Yep, alright. I'll take it. Thank you. But she might be - she's like kneeling down and just. – Cos Mary was really Catholic so, um, you would think they would like kneel to the angel. – *And what's changing your mind now?* – 'Cos I saw the wings on the kneeling person. And I can just – it just makes more sense for Mary to have that look rather than the angel. – it would be like, you can see the emotion on their faces (*in a good picture*). – the angel's just saying like 'Don't worry' and Mary's like, she's had a Bible on her lap and she's just crossing her arms like that (*crosses arms across chest to demonstrate*) which might be a sign of – um, I don't know – just

	sight of it, it just looks like they're dancing…. – I think this is the angel and this is Mary and Mary's like holding her head back and just looks really confused and like just not normal. And the angel's just like sitting there and his mouth's a bit open so you can tell that the angel's speaking. And yeah – that's like really realistic. …. Just the colours. – I also like how there's the bird up there. I don't know what it means but, just, might be – Oh! I know! It's the Holy Spirit, I think. I think, the Holy Spirit **Alex (age 9)** – Cos there's like an angel there and Mary's looking at it and um and she's praying. – it's like all many pictures around it and like an angel. It's like a Bible a bit. It's like a Bible. And Mary and the angel. There's like birds down here (pause), and pictures. …there's like a church here and um (pause) um it's like a Bible. – there's like no actual um like these kind of peoples. It's just like drawn weird things on it. And I don't - can't really see it really…and not really real background. – 'Cos, like all weird pictures and you can't really see what it is - means that much. – Good because you can actually see the colours – not actual colours – the people – they've been drawn….. it's like you can actually re- look at it but you can't really look at these ones that much (indicates No. 12 & No. 9). – Mary's there and there's like a piece of paper and she has something in her hand, there – I think it's good….'cos it's actually real colours in it and, um, people, more than just like two people and there's like more colours and more ac- um, images. **Lily (age 9)** – you can see, um, that's there's been put, um, little words there and you can see that it's talking to Mary… and Mary's thinking by her hands, um, thinking 'how is this going to happen?' …..I'm so blessed for an angel to come down and talk to me. – I like this picture 'cos (pause) it looks more well it shows that she's young um and that (pause) yeah it shows that she's young and (long pause) she's smaller and she's wearing a like teenagey dress and shoes um …I like, like the surrounding – the houses - it's more, um um realistic like it looks more real. Real like you might see it. – I mostly chose this one 'cos um there was a dove in it. Um, and… how I don't…oh…there is… well it, I like how they've drawn it – they've actually drawn it not painted it. The faces are a bit different um to the other pictures um, oh she's come in, Mary's in her house and she's come in through the window…Gabriel has come in through the window and I thought that was a good idea. – it's not very clear who the angel is and who,	thanksgiving or something. And the angel's like yeah just kneeling down and Mary's just looking up like confused but she's probably thinking 'Wow this is amazing'. And you can see that by her face, she's like (*demonstrates surprised facial expression*) – you wouldn't think that they would be dancing if they um had just said just said – Mary wouldn't be dancing if she just got the she the message from the angel. Like she could but 'cos she was shocked and um a bit confused. Yeah it doesn't really tell you that she's happy so in this picture it is saying that. – I think this is the angel and this is Mary and Mary's like holding her head back and just looks really confused and like just not normal. – Like if you get confused you would probably just - and see an angel – you'd probably just stay back a bit because you could think that it, like, you never know what could happen (*leans back in seat to demonstrate*). **Alex (age 9)** Nil **Lily (age 9)** – the angel Gabriel, is coming to Mary's house and Mary doesn't look that surprised – she doesn't have any expression that much.
Alex (age 9) The angel the light around the angel. I think it's good….'cos it's actually real colours in it …and there's like more colours . **Lily (age 9)** Nil		

	um, Mary is....'cos you can't see – they look like they're dancing sort of. – it doesn't really look like – it sort of looks like – two people maybe – it sort of looks Aboriginal – like an aboriginal picture. It's got like all different weird things. It's got, by the looks of it, a worm and some sort of thing (?). – there wasn't anyone else while um the angel was um talking to Mary – 'cos there's two other people there and um well it looks like it's in a church and I don't think um Gabriel came um in a church. **Hannah (age 9)** – (*Looking for*) maybe like Mary praying or reading a book or something and maybe the angel Gabriel like. – it kind of like shows how she's telling her that she's like got a– having a baby and how she's like saying – trying to say like 'how does that mean'? – it looks like she's (Mary's) praying – I'm not sure what that is (*indicates church model beside Mary*) .... And, um, she's (*indicates the angel*) kinda doing the same thing as her (*indicates the angel in no. 3*), like trying to tell her ... she's like kinda speaking to her (*Mary*) with her hand actions. – I like, about like how she's praying (*indicates Mary*) near that thing, and how she's (*indicates the angel*) got those (*indicates the flowers*) – how she's telling her and I like how she's doing that as well (*holding her hands*). – that looks like an angel because it's got like all the light around it. And, um, she's kind of praying while she's telling her (*demonstrates hands held together*). .... And Mary was praying and then the angel came in and told her.... – I can see where they are and how Mary's looking. – I can't really tell who's who. And like, it doesn't have much – it doesn't really show what Mary's doing or what the angel's doing. I can kind of just see that that might be the angel and that might be Mary. – I can't really see like what's happening and can't like see where Mary is or (pause) where they are. Well, I kind of know where they are but like it doesn't tell that much. I kind of know because it kind of looks like a head and, um, that looks like the body	**Hannah (age 9)** – She's kind of bending over (*indicates the angel*), 'cos she's sitting down (*indicates Mary*), and she's like using her hands (*indicates the angel again*) and she's pointing like that ....and Mary's like why me?'. – she's blessed and she's like (pause) happy that it's like her – I like, about like how she's praying (*indicates Mary*) near that thing, and how she's (*indicates the angel*) got those (*indicates the flowers*) – how she's telling her and I like how she's doing that as well (*holding her hands*).
Hannah (age 9) Nil		