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Children's Visual Worlds: Participatory Photography as a Lens for Understanding Young Children's Visual Arts Experiences

Visual Knowledge Creation and Critique

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Abstract

This article explores how participatory photography can offer new ways of understanding children's visual lives, interests, and meaning-making in early childhood education. It draws from a doctoral study that investigated children's experiences of visual arts learning in three early childhood settings in Aotearoa New Zealand. While the broader project used a range of participatory and qualitative methods with teachers, children, and families, this article focuses specifically on the methods used with young children. Six participants and their families across the three ECE settings were invited to document their visual experiences at home using digital cameras, offering insights into what held significance in their visual and material worlds. The article shares the narratives of three children, four-year-old twins Ellie and Sydney, and four-year-old Finn, to illustrate how child-led visual storytelling can challenge adult-centric research norms and foreground children's agency, creativity, and rights. Framed by an interpretivist, narrative orientation, it concludes by considering the ethical and methodological implications of positioning children as co-researchers and argues that participatory visual methods can meaningfully value children's voices, identities, and lived experiences, contributing to debates on children's rights (UNCROC Articles 12 and 31), visual literacy, and methodological justice in early childhood research.

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visual knowledge creation and critique – participatory visual methods – early childhood education – visual arts – children's agency – photography – narrative inquiry

1 Introduction

Young children live in increasingly visual worlds. From infancy, they are surrounded by images, objects, and materials, and as a result develop sophisticated, embodied forms of visual literacy long before they acquire conventional literacy skills (Berger, 2008). In contemporary society, where communication often occurs through multimodal and visual texts, the visual arts play a central role not only in children's lives but in how communication, learning, and identity are shaped more broadly (Crafton et al., 2009; Denee & Cherrington, 2023). Valuing and creating opportunities for young children to encounter, create, and discuss diverse visual forms therefore remains essential, as does recognising the potential of the visual in early childhood research (McArdle, 2012).

Yet the visual arts continue to be marginalised in early childhood pedagogy and research, due to factors such as teachers' limited confidence and knowledge in the arts, and policy and curriculum shifts that privilege measurable outcomes and standardisation (Denee et al., 2024; Lindsay et al., 2025). This is concerning, as art-making nurtures dispositions such as resilience, imagination, and collaboration, while offering powerful means of communication (Lindsay et al., 2025). Such narrowing of arts practice can reduce opportunities for children's creative and critical engagement with the visual world. Visual modalities also open possibilities for research that reflects children's perspectives and ways of knowing, countering more traditional approaches that privilege adult-centric interpretations (Clark, 2011). Participatory visual methods, in particular, invite children to represent their experiences and ideas on their own terms, revealing complex layers of meaning that might otherwise remain unseen (Clark, 2011).

This article reports on a study that examined how contextual influences shape the ways in which young children come to value and engage with the visual arts across home and early childhood education (ECE) settings. The aim of the study was to understand what shapes young children's engagement with the visual arts, with particular attention to the relational, pedagogical, and cultural conditions that support children's meaning-making in their everyday worlds.

The overarching research question was: *How do contextual influences shape how young children come to value and use the visual arts in their learning?* This question was explored through attention to teachers' pedagogical beliefs and practices, the relational ecologies that shape children's visual arts experiences across home and early childhood settings, and the ways curriculum values and local contexts shape visual arts practice in early childhood settings.

Grounded in sociocultural and bioecological perspectives, the research views learning and meaning-making as inherently relational and contextually situated. These frameworks position children's artistic and communicative acts as part of broader systems of relationships between people, materials, and environments (Vygotsky, 1962; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Within this view, participatory visual approaches are especially powerful because they invite children to engage through their own representational languages, supporting interpretations that are situated, embodied, and relational. In this sense, the visual is not merely a means of artistic expression but a communicative and epistemic mode through which children construct and share understanding within their cultural worlds.

Influenced by narrative inquiry, the study employed a multi-method design that combined traditional qualitative techniques with participatory and arts-based methods. Participatory photography formed the central approach for engaging with children's perspectives. Children and their families were invited to use digital cameras over a three-week period to document materials, spaces, and visual experiences of personal significance. This article focuses specifically on this participatory photography component and on the narratives of three of the six focal participants, four-year-old twins Ellie and Sydney, and Finn, also four years old. Their images and accompanying conversations illuminate how child-led visual storytelling can deepen understandings of artistic interest, imagination, and relational ways of knowing, extending and sometimes complicating what had been previously observed within their ECE settings.

2 The Visual in Early Childhood Education

The term visual in early childhood contexts encompasses more than traditional visual arts; it refers to the wider domain of visual culture that children encounter daily, through illustrations, digital media, environmental print, symbols, signs, and self-created images. From their earliest years, children inhabit visually saturated environments, developing embodied visual literacies as they make meaning through images, materials, and objects. Visual modalities, both

expressive and interpretive, are therefore foundational to how children come to understand the world, communicate ideas, and construct their identities, often through narrative-rich, relational experiences of making (Ruscoe, 2022). As Ruscoe (2022) highlights in her study of young children's drawing practices, children engage deeply with visual media to explore and express their understandings, using drawing as a process of meaning-making that reflects both cognitive and imaginative engagement.

Despite the centrality of the visual in children's lives, early childhood education (ECE) practice often reflects inconsistent understandings of children's visual experiences and learning. While curricula such as *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017), Aotearoa New Zealand's bicultural early childhood curriculum, emphasise multimodal communication, many teachers report limited preparation for supporting rich visual arts learning.This may stem from gaps in initial teacher education or personal schooling experiences that have led some educators to see themselves as "not artistic" (Denee et al., 2024; Lindsay et al., 2025). These factors can contribute to a narrowing of visual arts practice, where the focus shifts from exploratory, process-oriented engagement to product-driven outcomes that limit children's creative possibilities.

This limited framing of arts practice not only restricts children's opportunities for creative expression but also their critical engagement with the visual world. Developing visual literacy involves more than producing art, it includes recognising that images are socially and culturally constructed and carry embedded messages. If children are to navigate and interpret meaning in a multimodal world, visual learning must be positioned as essential, rather than peripheral within early learning environments (McArdle, 2012; Lindsay et al., 2025). Ruscoe (2022) similarly critiques narrow pedagogical framings of visual arts, arguing for a shift towards recognising children's visual work as relational, multimodal, and embedded in the contexts of children's own inquiries and storytelling.

3 Children's Rights, Participation, and Arts-Based Approaches in Research

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) affirms children's right to express their views on matters affecting their lives and to have those views given due weight. Although widely recognised in policy, research with young children has not always reflected this principle, often privileging adult perspectives and limiting genuine participation. The UNCRC

provides a framework for rethinking research design, encouraging approaches that enable children to share perspectives in ways responsive to their developmental stage, interests, and preferred modes of communication (Clark, 2011; Blaisdell et al., 2019; Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015).

Arts-based methods are a powerful means of enacting these rights, as visual and creative modalities are natural, accessible forms of expression for young children (Prosser & Burke, 2008; Leavy, 2015; Ruscoe, 2022). For example, Ruscoe (2022) found that in self-directed drawing children engage in layered meaning-making that is as social as it is representational, illustrating the potential of arts-based approaches to foreground children's voices in ways authentic to their lived experience. This participatory ethos reflects an image of childhood in which children are "experts in their own lives," "skilful communicators," and "rights holders" (Clark, 2017). In practice, arts-based participatory research redistributes power, positions children as co-researchers, and disrupts adult–child hierarchies (Blaisdell et al., 2019; Barrett et al., 2012). Participation thus moves beyond consultation to include children in shaping research questions, methods, and interpretations, requiring researchers to remain responsive and reflexive (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015).

Arts-based inquiry also carries a political dimension. Children's accounts, including visual, verbal, and multimodal, can inform practice and policy, inviting adults to reconsider dominant constructions of childhood (Clark, 2011; Mayall, 1994). The significance of children's visual work lies less in decoding a single meaning than in recognising its relational nature and its capacity to create space for shared storytelling that resists adult interpretation (Ruscoe, 2022). A key strength of arts-based research is its inclusivity and adaptability, enabling participation from children with diverse communication styles (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015). These methods are process-oriented, supporting exploration and dialogue rather than final products (Blaisdell et al., 2019). As Clark (2011) notes, artworks often serve as "a starting point for further dialogue and reflection" (p. 327), fostering sustained, reciprocal engagement between children and adults (Hickey-Moody et al., 2021).

For Blaisdell et al. (2019), arts-based participatory research is "a route to empowerment and participation rather than a tool for positivist 'data extraction'" (p. 17). Its effectiveness, however, depends on viewing children as competent participants and maintaining methodological integrity. Challenges include tokenism, subjective interpretation, and ethical issues of consent, confidentiality, and image use (Clandinin, 2014). Without careful reflexivity, participation can become symbolic rather than substantive, with children's visual contributions used decoratively rather than interpretively. Researchers must also

navigate the complexities of representing others ethically, balancing children's ownership of their images with responsibilities for privacy and protection. Ensuring genuine participation requires reflective practice that continually balances researcher aims with children's perspectives (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015).

Ethical considerations are therefore central to participatory research with young children, particularly when visual methods are used. Involving children as co-researchers raises questions of consent, power, and representation. Informed consent must be understood as an ongoing, negotiated process (Alderson & Morrow, 2020; Nutbrown, 2013), with researchers attentive to children's verbal and non-verbal cues and allowing withdrawal or re-engagement at any time. When visual data are involved, decisions about image ownership, storage, and dissemination must prioritise privacy and dignity, especially where non-participants appear (Prosser & Burke, 2008). Respecting children's choices about whether and how images are shared is both an ethical and an agency-affirming act (Clark, 2011).

Interpretation also requires care. Children's photographs and artwork rarely offer singular meanings, and adults must resist simplifying them. Instead, researchers should create opportunities for children to guide interpretation (Clark, 2011; Ruscoe, 2022). In participatory visual research, methods such as photo-elicitation, for example, enable children's images to become catalysts for conversation and reflection led by the child. Through these dialogues, interpretation is co-constructed rather than imposed, aligning ethical practice with methodological integrity. This relational approach to ethics, grounded in reciprocity and respect, underpins methodological choices such as photo-elicitation, which foreground children's voices while addressing the complexities of power, agency, and representation (Clandinin, 2014; Blaisdell et al., 2019).

4 Participant-Led Photography with Young Children

Participant-led photography is a flexible methodology that can be tailored to specific research aims while remaining responsive to children's needs, interests, and perspectives. Groundwater-Smith et al. (2015) identify three primary applications; participant-led image creation, researcher-produced images that invite participant response, and the use of existing images to prompt discussion. This adaptability enables integration into diverse research designs and contexts.

A central strength lies in photography's capacity to support children's self-representation. When children control the framing, selection, and timing of photographs, they decide what is meaningful to them, taking on a curatorial role (Hickey-Moody et al., 2021). This transfer of decision-making power fosters authentic participation and aligns with principles of agency and voice. Photographs produced in this way capture tangible and sensory dimensions of lived experience, including fleeting or private moments often inaccessible to researchers (Hickey-Moody et al., 2021). When generated over time, they also provide a temporal record of evolving perspectives.

The discussion of photographs, such as 'photo-elicitation' or 'photo-talk', enable children to articulate meaning in their own terms (Clark, 2011). Such dialogue enables rich personal insights to emerge that might otherwise remain hidden. As Ruscoe (2022) observes, visual storytelling is part of a broader communicative process encompassing gesture, narration, and social interaction. Beyond its research value, participant-led photography can also serve as advocacy, especially in photo-voice approaches that share children's images and stories with broader audiences (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015). Its playful, inclusive nature invites participation and reveals dimensions of children's visual and material worlds that may remain hidden from adult view.

5 Research Design and Context

This qualitative study was conducted across three early childhood education (ECE) settings in Aotearoa New Zealand. ECE in Aotearoa is guided by *Te Whāriki: He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa* (Ministry of Education, 2017), a bicultural, sociocultural curriculum grounded in empowerment, holistic development, family and community, and relationships. It positions children as competent learners whose identities develop through reciprocal relationships within rich cultural and material contexts. The curriculum's metaphor of a woven mat (whāriki) highlights interconnectedness among people, places, and learning pathways. Within this framework, the visual arts are viewed as one of many multimodal "languages" through which children construct meaning, aligning with participatory and arts-based approaches to research.

The three ECE settings were selected for their strong engagement with the visual arts. A cross-contextual design enabled exploration of children's experiences across home and ECE environments, illuminating how creative practices

and values intersected within and beyond the classroom (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015). A multi-method design combined qualitative and participatory approaches consistent with sociocultural and bioecological perspectives that situate learning within social, cultural, and environmental systems (Vygotsky, 1962; Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Participants included teachers, children, and families. Teachers were involved throughout the study, contributing to focus group discussions, sustained classroom observations, and keeping reflective art journals that combined visual and written responses about their pedagogy and relationships with the arts. Six focal children (aged four) and their parents took part in the participatory photography component. Both children and parents were each provided with a digital camera and produced their own photographs. Children's photographs were the primary focus of the photo-elicitation conversations. Parents' photographs were introduced following the child-led discussions, with children present and often contributing additional comments, interpretations, and reflections.

Each focal child was invited to participate in a participatory photography activity during the fieldwork period. Children were provided with a digital camera for a three-week period and were invited to photograph what they considered visually important in their daily lives, both at home and in their early childhood setting. These images then formed the basis of photo-elicitation conversations, led by the children, in which they selected, described, and reflected on their photographs. In this way, children played an active role in shaping the content and direction of the conversations, producing participant-driven narratives that illuminated their meaning-making.

6 Conceptual and Methodological Framework

The study was informed by sociocultural (Vygotsky, 1962) and bioecological (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) theories, which view learning and creativity as developing through social interaction within nested contexts. These frameworks positioned children's visual arts engagement as relational and culturally situated, shaped by the interplay of home and ECE environments. In this study, the home and ECE environments are understood as interconnected and mutually influential contexts, with meanings, practices, and values related to the visual arts travelling across settings through children's relationships and lived experiences. A narrative inquiry approach (Clandinin, 2014) framed both data generation and interpretation, recognising experience as storied and relational. Within this, participatory and arts-based visual methods were used to honour

children's multimodal expression and agency (Clark, 2011; Leavy, 2015; Prosser & Burke, 2008). Digital photography provided an accessible medium for children to document and interpret their visual worlds, while photo-elicitation dialogues enabled co-construction of meaning between researcher, child, and family, allowing children's "visual voices" to emerge within an interpretivist paradigm.

7 Data Analysis

Data analysis was iterative and interpretive, informed by narrative inquiry and arts-based analytical traditions (Clandinin, 2014; Leavy, 2015). Analysis began during fieldwork through reflective journaling and visual annotations, which captured early insights, questions, and contextual observations.

Following transcription of interviews and photo-elicitation conversations, all data sets, including interview transcripts, field notes, photographs, and participants' visual journals, were read and viewed repeatedly. Analysis involved close attention to moments of interaction, segments of talk, and visual features within images (such as composition, repetition, material use, and points of focus) that were significant to participants' experiences.

Visual and textual data were analysed concurrently. Guided by Collier's (2001) four phases of visual analysis, photographs were first considered as complete images, then examined in relation to accompanying talk, gesture, and contextual field notes, and subsequently grouped according to emerging ideas. These interpretive groupings were not predefined but emerged inductively through repeated engagement with visual and textual materials. Attention was given to how imagery, language, interaction, and context worked together to convey children's perspectives (Clark, 2011).

Analysis was undertaken by the researcher as a sole analyst, consistent with the emphasis narrative approaches place on interpretive engagement and reflexivity (Clandinin, 2014). Reflexive journaling and iterative re-reading supported careful consideration of emerging interpretations and their alignment with the data.

Through iterative cycles of comparison and reflection, patterns of meaning were identified and gradually clustered into broader analytic groupings aligned with the study's theoretical framing, such as relational pedagogies, connections across contexts, and children's meaning-making through visual media. These groupings informed the development of narrative portraits. Re-storying involved weaving visual and textual fragments into coherent narrative accounts that foregrounded participants' lived experiences while

acknowledging the researcher's interpretive role (Bradbury, 2017; Clandinin, 2014). Throughout this process, attention was given to preserving the aesthetic, affective, and relational dimensions of the data.

8 Reflexive Considerations and Limitations

As an interpretive, narrative inquiry, this study does not seek generalisability, and the small number of participating settings and families necessarily limits the scope of the claims that can be made. Rather, the intent is to offer situated, in-depth accounts that illuminate how visual arts practices are experienced and valued within particular contexts. It is also important to acknowledge how the researcher's close involvement in photo-elicitation conversations shaped the data generated. While this relational positioning enabled rich dialogue, it inevitably influenced which moments were foregrounded and how images were discussed, a condition consistent with the emphasis narrative approaches place on relational and interpretive meaning-making (Clandinin, 2014; Bradbury, 2017).

Interpreting children's visual images presents further complexity. Images are inherently *polysemic*, with meanings that are contingent, relational, and situated in time. While children's talk, gestures, and interactions provided important contextual cues for interpretation, meanings remain partial and provisional rather than fixed (Clark, 2011). Finally, translating multimodal, embodied, and visual processes into written text risks flattening the affective and sensory dimensions of children's experiences. These limitations are acknowledged as part of the methodological and representational challenges inherent in narrative and arts-based research.

9 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the author's institution. Ethical practice was understood as relational and ongoing rather than procedural (Clandinin, 2014; Nutbrown, 2013). Written consent was obtained from parents, caregivers, and teachers, with assent and ongoing verbal consent sought from children, who could withdraw or delete photographs at any time (Alderson & Morrow, 2020). Pseudonyms were assigned to all settings, teachers, and children, except the six focal participants who, with ethics approval, could choose to be named. Non-consenting individuals were not observed or recorded, and any images including them were excluded (Prosser & Burke, 2008). Families and children

selected which photographs to share, and interpretations were discussed with participants to ensure comfort with representation (Clark, 2011). These practices reflected a commitment to children's rights to participation and protection (UNCRC, 1989) and upheld methodological integrity through reciprocity, transparency, and respect across research relationships.

10 The Visual Lives of Children: Narrative Portraits

The following section presents the narrative portraits that emerged from the analysis, weaving together visual and textual narratives to illustrate how children experienced and expressed the visual arts in their everyday worlds. Aligned with the study's interpretivist and narrative orientation, these portraits are not generalisable cases but situated stories that reveal the richness and diversity of children's perspectives. Through the interplay of image, dialogue, and context, they highlight how meaning is co-constructed across home and early childhood settings. The section focuses on three key participants, four-year-old twins Ellie and Sydney, and four-year-old Finn, each introduced through a brief account of their visual arts engagement within their ECE setting.

11 Ellie and Sydney: Textures, Animals, and Shared Imaginations

11.1 *At Kindergarten*

Four-year-old twins Ellie and Sydney attended Amanta Kindergarten, a vibrant, child-centred environment on Auckland's North Shore where visual arts were integral to daily learning. Richly resourced art spaces encouraged independent access and experimentation, reflecting a sociocultural view of environments as mediating systems through which children construct meaning (Vygotsky, 1962; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). As an Enviroschool,[1] Amanta integrated sustainable values and Māori perspectives, fostering environmental responsibility and cultural responsiveness. Its philosophy positioned children as capable, self-directed learners whose cultural knowledge was valued and extended through exploration, problem-solving, and artistic expression supported by responsive teacher engagement.

1 *Enviroschools* is a national programme in Aotearoa New Zealand that supports early childhood centres and schools to develop sustainable practices and environmental awareness through inquiry-based, participatory learning.

FIGURE 1 Ellie and Sydney creating at kindergarten

FIGURE 2 Fleur's open-ended dialogue with Sydney, modelling art as an evolving process

From my first visits, Ellie and Sydney's shared fascination with animals was evident in their drawings and imaginative play. Each morning, they gravitated towards the art spaces, working side-by-side on drawings, constructions, or mixed-media pieces (Figure 1). Teachers nurtured these interests through open-ended dialogue and genuine curiosity rather than directing outcomes, an approach Brooks (2009) identifies as central to honouring children's perspectives.

One morning, head teacher Fleur joined them in a guessing game as they drew animals (Figure 2). "It likes to live in the forest and it plays with wolves. It's white and fluffy and it starts with P," Sydney teased. When Fleur guessed "Polar bear?" Sydney laughed: "No, it's a red panda!" When Sydney changed her drawing mid-way, Fleur commented, "That's what happens with drawing, sometimes your ideas change as you draw." Her remarks modelled artistic thinking as an evolving process (Deans & Brown, 2008). When the twins added string for fur, Fleur offered materials while leaving decisions in their hands: "If you want to stick that, here's some glue, but I'm not sure what your idea is yet." Such interactions reflected the teachers' ethos of trusting children to lead,

experiment, and communicate their ideas, skills that later carried into their home-based photographic storytelling.

11.2 *At Home*

These sustained observations provided a foundation for the participatory photography phase that followed. Inviting Ellie, Sydney, and their mother, Rebecca, to use cameras in their own environment shifted the focus from classroom observation to self-chosen visual narratives. This transition reflected a move from researcher observation to co-construction, aligning with participatory visual methods that foreground children's agency and interpretive voice (Clark, 2011; 2017).

11.3 *Ellie's Photographs*

Ellie's photographs gravitated toward two recurring themes such as animals and tactile textures such as fluffy blankets and the fur of stuffed toys (Figure 3). These choices surprised her mother, who had expected more representational imagery. Instead, Ellie's photographs highlighted a sensory, tactile mode of engagement, showing how young children often explore through touch as much as through depiction (Lewin-Benham, 2023). Rebecca reflected that children may feel pressure to depict identifiable subjects because adults tend to ask, "What is it?", a dynamic Anning and Ring (2004) critique for privileging symbolic representation over exploratory visual expression.

Ellie's images spanned home, popular culture, and community life including domestic scenes with familiar objects, animal-themed décor, and references to media texts such as *The Jungle Book* (Figure 4). Visits to the library and community sites such as the Auckland Art Gallery featured prominently, with animals consistently guiding her choices. Together, these photographs revealed the interweaving of home routines, family outings, and personal interests, reflecting the "funds of knowledge" that informed her creative expression (Hedges et al., 2011). They also illustrate how children's creativity is embedded in social

FIGURE 3 Ellie's photographs of fluffy surfaces, expressing her tactile curiosity

FIGURE 4 Ellie referencing animal motifs including *The Jungle Book*, showing the influence of popular culture

and cultural ecologies, where relationships, values, and environments shape learning and meaning-making (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Vygotsky, 1962).

11.4 *Sydney's Photographs*

While Sydney's images echoed her sister's interest in animals and textures, they showed a distinctive attention to detail and composition. Many were tightly framed close-ups (Figure 5) alongside playful "selfies" highlighting animal prints on her clothing (Figure 6). Rebecca noted that both children often noticed subtleties and patterns that adults might overlook, though this attentiveness was especially marked in Sydney's work. Her compositional choices illustrate how children explore authorship and perspective through visual media, positioning photography as a mode of inquiry and expression rather than simple documentation (Ruscoe, 2022; Clark, 2011).

Sydney also photographed illustrations in picture books at the local library, extending her interest in fine detail to two-dimensional representations. Texture again emerged as a consistent theme, often intertwined with her curiosity about how details worked visually at close range.

11.5 *Shared Themes and Family Insights*

Viewing the photographs together became an act of shared reflection for Rebecca. She realised that what appeared on the surface to be an interest in animals was, at its core, a fascination with texture, especially softness and fur. This recognition was reinforced by images of the girls' art-making at home, where tactile qualities were consciously integrated into their work (Figure 7).

Rebecca recalled that the twins' fascination with textures dated back to infancy, when they were captivated by their nana's collection of stuffed animals. "They love going to her house and run straight to the bedroom with the animals," she said. This early sensory connection resurfaced after the family attended a theatre production of *The Lion in the Meadow*. The next morning,

FIGURE 5 Sydney's close-up compositions, highlighting her interest in pattern and detail

FIGURE 6 Sydney's "selfie's" showing animal prints in a range of contexts

FIGURE 7 Ellie and Sydney's collaborative art-making at home

FIGURE 8 Post-theatre drawings of *The Lion in the Meadow*, connecting lived experience with creative expression captured by Rebecca

both girls drew the lion, experimenting with materials to recreate its texture (Figure 8).

These narratives show how Ellie and Sydney's art-making was grounded in lived experience, at home, in the community, and through early encounters with cherished objects, illustrating creativity as emerging through relationships and meaningful environments (Trimis & Savva, 2009). Their photographs and conversations reveal creativity rooted in the sensory and relational textures of daily life, highlighting the material–emotional dimensions of young children's meaning-making.

12 Finn's Story

Four-year-old Finn attended Alfredo Early Childhood Centre, a private Auckland setting influenced by the Reggio Emilia philosophy and *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017). Teachers emphasised children's autonomy, inquiry-based learning, and the visual arts as central to thinking and expression. Expansive, light-filled spaces, open-ended materials, and thoughtful provocations supported deep creative engagement. A full-time *atelierista*, Andrea, worked alongside teachers to use art materials as tools for critical thinking and communication. That year, the centre's inquiry focus, *fostering an ecological future.* invited children to explore environmental awareness through creative projects, linking art, inquiry, and imagination in ways that shaped Finn's developing visual expression.

Finn was deeply involved in a butterfly inquiry that began with children's observations of live butterflies. They made detailed drawings, used digital microscopes to examine wing patterns (Figure 9), and debated where the butterflies went after leaving the swan plants. A shared theory emerged that the butterflies had gone to Neverland. Finn contributed, "I know a mountain near

FIGURE 9 Finn shares his butterfly book from home

Alfredo – that's where they must have gone." This led to a family-supported "search" for the butterflies, which resulted in the discovery of a hut and a new theory that the butterflies might now live there. Back in the atelier, the children designed butterfly huts with spaces to dry wings and store leaves. Finn proposed including "skipping ropes so the butterflies can dry their wings." This blending of realistic needs with whimsical invention reflected Alfredo's pedagogy of valuing children's working theories (MoE, 2017) and their right to explore both rational and imaginative dimensions of a problem (Rinaldi, 2004). Such inquiry-based art-making exemplifies how creativity emerges through collaborative theorising, where imagination becomes a form of knowledge construction (Vecchi, 2010).

12.1 *Finn's Images at Home*

At the conclusion of the Alfredo observations, Finn and his parents, Shannon and Dylan, were given digital cameras. Several weeks later, we met at their home to view and discuss the photographs. This phase extended the participatory aspect of the research into the home, inviting Finn to represent his visual world through self-chosen imagery (Clark, 2011). His photographs revealed a fascination with detail, close-up shots of rugs, patterned fabrics, and small objects (Figure 10).

Popular culture was a strong presence, particularly *My Little Pony* and *Octonauts* figurines, often arranged in elaborate play scenes (Figure 11).

Shannon explained that his passion for water-themed narratives stemmed from time on his grandfather's yacht, influencing the characters and stories he chose to depict.

During our conversation, Finn left to fetch his whiteboard (Figure 12) and began drawing while narrating:

FIGURE 10 Finn's close-up photographs reflecting his attention to visual texture

FIGURE 11 Finn's images depicting My Little Pony and Octonauts characters

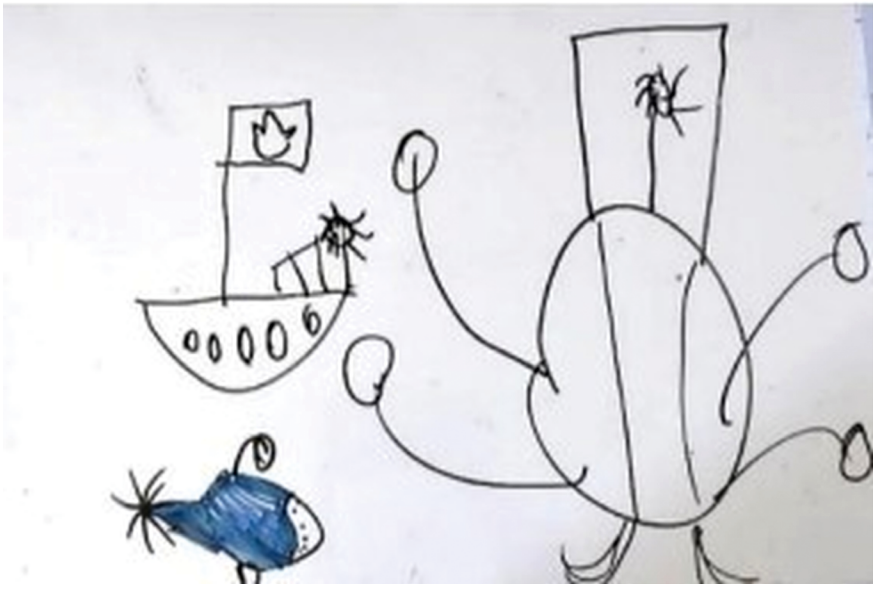

FIGURE 12 Finn's whiteboard drawing combining story, gesture, and image

> It's a gup-e, octoport, and a pirate ship crashing into the octopod. That's gup-e trying to stop the ship.

Finn's narrative drawing illustrated how visual media and storytelling intertwine as tools for thinking, turning drawing into a performative act of meaning-making (Brooks, 2009). His process was dynamic and verbal, integrating movement and story, something Shannon noted he often did at home, drawing on his whiteboard like a teacher, complete with songs and family anecdotes such as "the story about Mummy going to work." When I asked whether the visual arts he engaged in at Alfredo were the same as at home, Finn replied, "Sabrina does hands with wire and Ella does shoes and Katy is looking at the printed butterflies." "So, is it the same or different?", I asked. Finn clarified, "It's different at home, we do more drawing on the whiteboard."

13 Shannon's Images and Perspectives

Shannon's photographs added further context, capturing Finn mid-process, drawing, working with playdough, arranging toys, and creating "cubby pictures" from small treasures in his room. One series showed him replicating rug patterns in playdough (Figure 13). This movement between observation and representation echoed inquiry practices at Alfredo, where children revisit and reimagine what they see through artistic processes. Finn's iterative engagement reflected the Reggio-inspired view of the child as an "aesthetic researcher," whose creativity develops through cycles of looking, interpreting, and making (Tarr, 2018; Vecchi, 2010).

Visual arts was also a shared family ritual. Each evening, Finn and his parents each drew a highlight from the day on the whiteboard (Figure 14), a practice Shannon described as "telling the story of our day and making sense of what happened."

FIGURE 13 Shannon's photographs of Finn recreating the rug patterns highlighting his process of observation and representation

FIGURE 14 The family's shared whiteboard ritual, depicting moments of daily storytelling through drawing

FIGURE 15 Finn's imaginative imagery, illustrating the fusion of real and fictional worlds

Shannon explained that Finn's art-making often helped him represent and process his world. His "cubby pictures" combined materials and objects to create imagined scenarios, much like his whiteboard drawings, which evolved into visual narratives. As a media studies teacher, Shannon valued his engagement with fantasy, viewing it as a positive force for storytelling and imagination (Figure 15). She encouraged him to merge real experiences, such as observing butterflies at his nan's house, with favourite fictional characters.

Across both settings, Finn's creative practices revealed strong continuities between home and centre, each nurturing inquiry, reflection, and imaginative

play. His fascination with winged creatures, attention to detail, and use of visual media for storytelling showed how ideas travelled between contexts, shaped by available materials and relationships. At Alfredo, his work focused on the natural world, while at home it merged real and fictional elements, combining butterflies with Octonauts or Fluttershy from *My Little Pony*. This movement between reality and fantasy illustrates how children's working theories draw from both lived experience and imagination (Vecchi, 2010). Finn's photographs and dialogue revealed a creative world co-constructed across pedagogical and familial contexts, showing how children's meaning-making evolves within relational ecologies of inquiry and imagination (Vygotsky, 1962; Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

14 Discussion

Taken together, these narratives illuminate that visual meaning-making is an ecological and relational process. Across home and early childhood settings, the children's photographs, drawings, and conversations revealed how meaning emerges through sensory experience, imagination, and trusting relationships with teachers and family. Participatory photography made this interplay visible, showing how children weave encounters with materials, people, and ideas to construct shared understandings of their worlds (Clark, 2011; Leavy, 2015; Vecchi, 2010), positioning them as collaborators in meaning-making rather than as subjects of observation.

While photo-elicitation and Mosaic approaches (Clark, 2011; 2017) have long supported children's participation in visual research, they often position images primarily as prompts for reflection within researcher-framed processes. In this study, photo-elicitation formed one stage within a broader participatory photography approach, which granted children sustained authorship and interpretive autonomy. This distinction shifts visual methods from tools of representation to dialogic spaces of co-construction, where children's interpretive agency remained central throughout the research process (Blaisdell et al., 2019; Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015; Leavy, 2015).

15 Deepening Understanding of Children's Interests and Identities Through Participatory Photography

Participatory photography provided a lens into children's artistic, sensory, and imaginative worlds that extended beyond what classroom observation could capture (Clark, 2011; Hickey-Moody et al., 2021). Across the narratives, children's

images, conversations, and art-making revealed layers of meaning that might otherwise remain unseen. What appeared as straightforward interests, animals for Ellie and Sydney or butterflies for Finn, became complex explorations of texture, performance, and storytelling. These insights affirm the value of positioning children as "experts in their own lives", revealing aspects of experience often overlooked in adult interpretations (Clark, 2017).

The children's visual narratives also uncovered the "invisible curricula" of their everyday lives, the self-determined experiences, values, and priorities shaping learning beyond the more visible curriculum of early childhood settings (Anning & Ring, 2004; Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015). For Ellie and Sydney, this appeared in a sustained fascination with tactile qualities linked to early sensory comfort; for Finn, in home-based rituals of drawing and storytelling that nurtured reflection and multimodal expression. Such examples illustrate how learning is situated within children's cultural and material worlds, shaped by the resources, relationships, and routines that hold meaning (Trimis & Savva, 2009).

Participatory photography not only generated visual data but also created a relational space for meaning-making. Watching Finn narrate his whiteboard drawings illuminated the multimodal nature of children's artistic communication, where gesture, story, and image intertwine as forms of thinking and expression (Wright, 2014). Richards (2017) extends this view, conceptualising drawing and storytelling as "multimodal transformations" through which children mediate experience, moving between visual, gestural, verbal, and emotional modes to interpret and re-create their sociocultural worlds. As Brooks (2009) and Clark (2011) argue, young children make sense of their worlds through active, embodied engagement with materials and relationships. Such engagements are not only expressive but transformative. They connect inner experience with shared cultural meanings, generating new ways of seeing and being within communities (Richards, 2017). In this study, children's conversations, gestures, and material interactions were as significant as the photographs themselves, revealing how meaning emerged through artistic processes as much as through their outcomes.

16 Popular Culture, Home–ECE Connections, and Looking Beyond the Surface of Children's Interests

Building on this understanding of meaning-making as relational and situated, the children's engagement with popular culture further illustrates how they construct meaning across overlapping cultural and educational worlds.

This dimension of their expressive lives was most visible in the home context, where self-chosen photographs and narratives revealed media influences, characters, family rituals, and personal interests, which were less evident within ECE settings. Participatory photography made these connections visible creating symbolic bridges between home and early childhood contexts, showing how children weave imaginative, sensory, and social experiences into coherent narratives of their worlds. For example, Finn's images combined butterfly drawings with *My Little Pony* and *Octonauts* characters, while Ellie and Sydney's photographs blended animals from books, films, and family outings.

Rather than viewing popular culture as peripheral, these examples suggest it acts as a symbolic resource that extends children's multimodal meaning-making. As Friedrich et al. (2021) argue, popular culture teaches and thus constitutes a hidden curriculum shaping identities, relationships, and ways of knowing. From this perspective, media texts and narratives in children's everyday lives can be understood as emergent curricula through which they negotiate belonging, empathy, and imagination. Recognising popular culture as curriculum challenges views that see media merely as entertainment or engagement tools, instead positioning them as pedagogical and affective spaces where knowledge, emotion, and identity intersect. Within the children's homes, popular culture served not as a distraction but as an aesthetic and narrative resource, enabling children to layer meaning, build imaginative worlds, and develop working theories that span reality and fantasy. As Lee (2018) notes, popular culture holds powerful symbolic influence in shaping children's ways of being, belonging, and becoming, offering shared media languages through which they construct and negotiate identity and imagination. These multimodal narratives also echo Richards' (2017) argument that children's visual and narrative creations are cultural artefacts through which they mediate belonging and identity across home and educational contexts. Like drawing and storytelling, participatory photography functions as a medium of expression, enabling children to weave together the languages, materials, and values that shape their participation in cultural life.

17 Enacting Children's Rights to Participation and Cultural Engagement

The use of participatory photography in this study exemplifies how positioning children as co-constructors of meaning enacts their rights to participation and cultural life, as articulated in Articles 12 and 31 of the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989). By inviting children to decide what to photograph, how to

interpret their images, and when to share them, the research recognised them as rights-holders and active cultural participants, foregrounding their interpretive authority within the research process. Adults adopted a facilitative stance, supporting children's decision-making and interpretive leadership in ways consistent with the principles of participatory research (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015; Clark, 2017). This approach reinforces the study's central argument that creativity, identity, and rights are deeply intertwined within relational and ecological contexts.

By centring children's voices and treating their images as complex, meaning-rich artefacts, the process honoured both their rights and their capacity as cultural contributors. As McArdle (2012) observes, children's art-making is not a developmental stage but a sophisticated, multimodal form of meaning-making. Across Finn's, Ellie's, and Sydney's stories, the participatory process revealed diverse creative worlds shaped by relationships, experiences, and cultural resources. Common threads such as close observation, the merging of real and imagined worlds, and visual storytelling, illustrate how visual arts engagement extends beyond the classroom into home and community contexts. Revealing these relational and imaginative dimensions invites reflection on how early childhood teachers might engage more deeply with children's perspectives and strengthen learning across contexts.

A key insight emerging across the findings is the role of mediated learning within a continuum of experience that extended across people, materials, images, and contexts. Viewed through a sociocultural and bioecological lens, this continuum reflects how learning is mediated through relationships and artefacts across interconnected settings. Children mediated their own meaning-making through sustained engagement with visual media, while adults' understandings and pedagogical responses were likewise shaped through interaction with children's images, talk, and actions. Visual artefacts functioned as cultural mediators, carrying meanings, values, and identities across home and early childhood settings. Attending to this mediating work makes visible how learning and belonging are not located within individuals alone, but emerge relationally through shared engagement in visual and material practices.

18 Implications for Practice and Research

This study highlights several implications for early childhood education practice and research. Participatory methods such as photography can deepen pedagogical relationships and strengthen continuity between home and early

childhood settings (Richards, 2017).. When educators engage with children's self-selected images and narratives, they gain insight into the interests, values, and experiences shaping learning beyond the centre. Such understandings can inform more responsive pedagogies and curriculum design that bridge children's cultural, familial, and educational worlds.

The study also illuminates the importance of ethical practice when engaging with young children's visual and narrative work. Respecting children's choices about what to photograph, how to interpret their images, and how these are shared requires attentiveness to agency, representation, and relational trust (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015). Ethical practice, in this sense, is not procedural but relational, grounded in reciprocity and respect.

Finally, participatory visual methods hold significant potential for educators and researchers. They offer a way to understand the multimodal and ecological nature of children's visual artmaking and interests, providing insight into how meaning is constructed across contexts, materials, and relationships. These approaches align with sociocultural and ecological perspectives, affirming that learning and identity are co-constructed through active participation in interconnected environments (Vygotsky, 1962; Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

19 Conclusion

These narratives demonstrate how participatory photography offers children meaningful opportunities to articulate their experiences and interests in ways traditional research methods may overlook. When children are positioned as co-researchers, leading, selecting, and narrating their own visual stories, their agency is not only acknowledged but actively supported. In this sense, participatory photography becomes more than a methodological tool but also a pedagogical and ethical stance that enacts children's rights to express, represent, and participate in cultural and artistic life (UNCRC, 1989).

As Richards (2017) observes, children's multimodal meaning-making, through drawing, storytelling, and other visual forms, constitutes a process of transformation and mediation, enabling them to reimagine and re-negotiate their social worlds. Participatory photography extends this by creating a shared space where children weave material, emotional, and symbolic dimensions of experience to make sense of their lives and where adults, in turn, gain deeper insight into children's thinking, ideas, and interests. By taking children's visual contributions seriously, this study challenges adult-centric paradigms and highlights the potential of relational, creative, and inclusive approaches to early childhood research. When educators and researchers look and listen with

children, the visual arts are revealed as a language of meaning-making, connection, and cultural participation.

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