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## **“A Slice of Life”: The Interrelationships among Art, Play and the “Real” Life of the Young Child**

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### **Abstract**

This study examines the interrelationships among art, play and “real” life, as perceived by young children. Twenty-one children aged four and five in their first year of formal schooling in Ireland, were observed during art-related play activities and classes over a period of four months in 2004. Research data consisted of art works (both original and photographed), field notes, video recordings of children’s behaviours and mini-interviews with the children. Data analysis revealed the multifaceted interrelationships between art, play and real life among the children. All children showed evidence of intertwining art, play and “real” life experiences in all strands of the visual arts curriculum. Individual differences in “cognitive style” unrelated to gender also emerged. Some worked quietly concentrating completely on the process and product in hand while others verbalised what was going on as they worked. Just over half of the children extended their actual experiences into the realm of fantasy in their art and play while the remainder tended to be factual, depicting and re-enacting

“real” life events as they experienced them. These findings have educational implications as young children’s artistic play activities are an important element in pre-service teacher education and in the teaching of Visual Arts at the Primary school level.

### **Introduction**

Four-year old Shandon meticulously drew a face with beautifully detailed and recognisable features. She then proceeded to “scribble” energetically over the entire drawing. Having completely obliterated the face, Shandon surveyed the drawing and then held it up with pride for all to see. “That’s the wind blowing my hair all over” she announced excitedly. Meanwhile, Leon, another four-year old, made a “Playstation” using a black box and odds and ends. First thing next morning, he bounded into the classroom extracting a wire clothes hanger and a Playstation game from his school bag. “Teacher, I’ve got the wire for the Playstation. Now it will work!” He wanted to wire his construction to the electrical system and use it to play his game!

I have seen this magical mix of art, play and real life occur so often in the infant room that it warrants some attention beyond the anecdotal and its implications deserve further examination. Piaget claims that the period from two to five years is “the dark ages in our knowledge of children” (Bruce, 1997, p. 108). Parents, teachers and others involved with young children may wonder about the significance of their drawings, paintings, clay forms, constructions or costumes. To the adult eye much of the art of very young children is a mystery. Considering it is a prime means of non-linguistic self-expression and symbolic communication, their art deserves more than cursory attention.

This study is conducted from a visual arts based perspective and it investigates the interrelationships among art, play and the real life of the child. The term “real” life of the child refers to the four and five-year olds’ perception and experience of life. Hawkins (1999) implies that a child’s experience of life is filtered through the imagination: “The imagination ... is implicated in any situation in which we make sense of the world around us” (p. 35). The role of the imagination is also examined in this study where fact and fantasy may be inextricably linked in how a child represents a real life experience.

The emotional, social, and educational benefits of play have long been recognised. Play is essential to learning about oneself and about life (Abbott, 1998; Drummond, 1999; Monighan-Nourot, 1991). Play is seen as “the source of abstract thought, imagination and practical intelligence” (Isenberg and Jalongo, 1997, p. 127). In this article, I highlight the main aspects of my research which was conducted in Ireland where children begin formal schooling at four or five years of age and where the visual arts curriculum consists of six

strands: drawing, paint and colour, printing, construction clay modelling, and work with fabric and fibre (Primary School Curriculum, Visual Arts, 1999).

### **Literature on Child Art, Play and Real Life**

The earliest records of children's drawings date back to 1224 with the birch bark drawings of six year old Onfim from Russia (Yanin, 1985) and the first of many systematic studies of children's self-initiated drawings was conducted by Ricci in 1887. Children have a natural tendency to play which was recognised as early as 1762 by Rousseau. "Free flow play is found among children in all parts of the world, as well as in ancient civilizations" (Bruce, in Moyles, 1998, p. 194). It is no surprise therefore, that more than two centuries later, there is a wealth of international literature on child art and also on play. Much has been written about early education and some insightful work on the "real" life of the child as processed by the imagination is also available. Rather less seems to have been written about the interrelationships among art, play and the life of the child.

Researchers on the arts come from different perspectives: psychological, philosophical, educational and aesthetic (Hawkins, 1999, p. 33) and many of them recognise the importance of art and play to the child in expressing and assimilating the experiences of life. Amongst others, educational researchers have suggested that there are links between a young child's art, play and real life.<sup>1</sup> In fact, Goodnow (1977) maintained that children's graphic art may be described "not only as visible thinking but even as a slice of life" (p. 154).

Definitions of art vary. For the purpose of this study, "art" is anything visual which the child creates within the six strands of the Visual Arts Curriculum. Morgan (1995) defines art as "never mere imitation; any art form is one of many possible statements about some kind of human experience" (p. 3). Lowenfeld and Brittain, (1982) state "the process of drawing, painting or constructing is a complex one in which the child brings together diverse elements of his experience to make a new and meaningful whole" (p. 3). Matthews (1999) believes that the physical movements, the playing and the communication that the child engages in during the creative process are all bound up in the artistic activity. Ivashkevich (2006) believes that each child's drawing "is an artefact of lived experience" (p. 57), a view strongly supported by my study.

Brent and Marjorie Wilson (Wilson & Wilson, 1982) challenged the traditional concept of developmental stages in child art and echoing the beliefs of Brittain, (1979), Goodnow (1977) and Matthews (1999), stressed that "marks and configurations that appear to be minimal and insignificant have been found to contain tremendously important ideas" (p.

37). My study reveals that much art created by young children at the pre-symbolic stage has intense meaning for them. The confidence that these children have in their work has not been shaken by self-criticism or by dissatisfaction with their efforts (Kellogg 1970, Morgan 1995, Mulcahy, 2002). Frisch (2006) in her study of children's drawings and Fineberg's (2006) photographs from an exhibition at the Krannert Art Museum demonstrate how some three and four year olds can create remarkably symbolic paintings and drawings, reinforcing the belief that the art of the child from the earliest stages has meaning for the child.

The concept of art as a form of play for both children and adults is not new. As early as 1968, Jameson states that "The act of painting for five to seven year-olds is creative play." He traces the creative activity (drawing, painting, craft, play) as originating in the child's imagination, directly or induced. It develops "in communication with his continuing imaginative, fantasy state" (p. 62). Matthews (1999) writes that "Play is implicated in the development of all forms of representation" (p. 24). This supports Wilson's belief that "art is a form of play" in his study of the art of a young boy, J.C. Holz (Fineberg, 2006, p.250). Hawkins (1999) and Prentice (1998) see connections between play, imagination and creativity and view the adult artist as engaging in play.

Children take their play seriously and rightly so, because play although difficult to define, is "indispensable to learning" (Matthews, 1999, p. 24). During my years in the junior classroom one of the main points I noted in relation to play was the total immersion of the child in the game whether in a solitary or group situation. A child who is playing half-heartedly is usually sick! (Sourkes, 1995, p. 6). Winnicott (1971) notes "the preoccupation that characterises the playing of a young child" (p. 51). Warnock (1994) writes of the power of the secondary imagination to create "new worlds" and that "It is the imagination at work in great works of art" (pp. 42-43). I am not suggesting that the children involved in this study were creating "great works of art," but they were both creating new worlds and making sense of their real lives through their imaginative involvement in art and play. Warnock (1976) echoes the views of Winnicott (1971) and Kearney (1988) in viewing the imagination as being an integral part of the way in which we perceive our world. "Imagination is understood as the process by which various sense impressions are made coherent as they are internalised" (Hawkins, 1999, p. 35).

Children in their art and play activities are exploring ideas which allow the world to be seen in new ways, "remaking reality" (David, 1999, p. 47). Thus the young child's recreation of a "real" life experience may, in fact, contain an element of invention or fantasy.

Interrelationships between art, play and life experience are also noted in the research of Reifel and Yeatman (1991) and Drummond (1999). In “Action, talk and thought in block play” (1991), Reifel and Yeatman illustrate an obvious overlap of play with the construction strand in the visual arts. They note that “real-world experiences provide ideas for block representation” (p. 157). Drummond (in Moylett, 1999) in her investigations into the kindergarten environment of a Steiner School describes the educational benefits to children as they construct their own “play spaces, their houses, palaces, flying machines” which involve them in “imaginative, transformative and exploratory acts” (p. 52).

Although Gardner in association with Winner, Wolf and Smith does not specifically link art, play and real life, some relationships between these concepts may be inferred (Gardner, 1982). In several instances Gardner refers to how the child’s experiences in real life either give rise to the artwork or influence its progress (p. 134). Haas Dyson supports this view when she writes of how young children through their play with paints, markers etc. capture, transform and think about some aspect of experience when “imaginary worlds come to life on their papers” (Scales, et al., 1991, p. 112). Contrary to this, Thompson (1999) notices that autobiographical drawings are rare among the sample of pre-school children in her study and points out that images of popular culture, nurtured by television, feature overwhelmingly. Overall, however, research literature tends to support the existence of discernable links between children’s two- and three-dimensional art, their play and their “real” lives.

### **Research Method and Design**

In choosing a qualitative research design I was influenced by among others, the work of Brittain (1979), Gardner (1982), Haas Dyson (1991, 1992), Monighan Nourot (1991), and Scales, et al. (1991), many of whom used an observational style of survey for art and play activities. I consulted Genishi’s (1992) work on teachers researching in their own classrooms as active participants in change and reform (p. 17). The methods of Goetz and Le Compte (1984), Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Maykut and Morehouse (1995) were used in designing the study, choosing the sample and collecting and analysing data.

The sample consisted of twenty-one four and five year old girls and boys from mixed backgrounds, socially and ethnically, in their first year of formal schooling in a suburban Irish school. The parents gave written consent and to ensure anonymity each child was given a pseudonym for all data. Triangulation was achieved by collecting data from various sources: copies of the children’s art works, written field notes, videos of the children in action and mini-interviews with the children. Observation sessions took place twice weekly during morning activity time from early January 2004 to the end of April

2004 in an “art rich” environment.<sup>2</sup> Contemporaneous *Study Notes* were taken and later typed.<sup>3</sup> Video recording and photographing of work in progress also took place at regular intervals. Activities were rotated daily in order to ensure that the children experienced all strands of the art curriculum particularly the box construction which was very popular.<sup>4</sup>

A file containing all relevant data was created for each child. Using the methods of Maykut and Morehouse (1995), the data were examined, indexed and analysed according to emergent patterns and themes from which the findings relating to the focus of the inquiry were drawn.

## Findings

*1. Art and real life experience are strongly related in the mind of the Junior Infant. This interrelationship manifests itself within various art strands and is evident in both pre-symbolic and symbolic art.*

In almost every case, despite the wide differences in the ways the children depicted their ideas, the common factor in their art was its relevance to their real lives as illustrated by the five samples discussed below. This finding is supported by the views of Jameson (1968), Morgan (1995), Goodnow (1977) and Matthews (1999). The meaning of the artwork could emerge before, during or after the art process and could change at any time depending on what was happening in the life of the child (Jameson, 1968, p. 63). The strong links found between the art of children and their real lives appear to contradict Thompson’s view of the rarity of autobiographical drawings among contemporary four year olds. It may be, however, that popular cartoon characters such as Barney, Donald Duck or the numerous Pokémon characters can become so much a part of the young child’s life that they become almost as real as personal friends. Therefore drawing them may not be too far removed from the life of the child.

To our eyes, David’s drawing (Figure 1) is a series of industriously over layered multicoloured scribbles. However, when David was drawing he earnestly described his violin, his new bunk bed, his bicycle and his dad listening to the radio before going downstairs to get him a drink of water, confirming Bruce’s belief that as a child at the pre-symbolic stage of artistic development, the images David formed were inside his mind (Bruce, 1997, p.108). Observing David on the videotape, we can sense how “real” his drawing was to him. Krotzsch (1917) in Fineberg (2006, p.220) notices the primacy of rhythm and movement in children’s “scribbling” and notes that scribbling leads to the development of graphic form, ornament and writing. On observation it was obvious that David enjoyed the physical sensation of drawing but equally important is how meaningful his picture was to him.



*Figure 1: David (age 4)*

*My bicycle, bed and violin and my dad listening to the radio*

Joley's drawing (Figure 2) shows the beginning of the transition from pre-symbolic to symbolic art. She depicts herself as a tiny figure (bottom left), in a swimming pool in which a huge splash of water surrounds a jagged red shape. Joley described how she saw "lots of red" when her head went under the water.



*Figure 2: Joley (age 4)*

*Me in the swimming pool*

There is a strong vividness in the depiction of this "real" life experience, based on the sensation Joley had experienced as the water put pressure on her closed eyes combined with the resounding splash she made. This is expressed in very strong jagged lines, shapes and colours, the result of a concentrated struggle for expression, but to the viewer



*Figure 3: Lynn (age 4)  
Gina at home watching TV*



*Figure 4: Lynn (age 4)  
My family*

it could seem meaningless. In her own way, Joley has conveyed what it was like to be overwhelmed by the water.

In Figures 3 and 4, Lynn depicts aspects of her home life. Figure 3 shows her aunt in a wheelchair watching the television. Notice the detail of the glasses (Lynn also wore glasses). Figure 4 shows her extended family. Lynn's father is drawn inside a box in the left fore-ground. All of her drawings of her father depicted him inside a rectangular shape which I mistook for a bed. Lynn, however, corrected me. "He's in work jail", (Video transcript, p.39). I later discovered that he was indeed in jail.



*Figure 5: Group box construction  
Driving to the picnic*



A construction always had some meaning whether it was a car, a house, a spaceship, a garage, a robot or a space station. Most constructions were quite simple. For example, a house might be a large box with the opening flaps for doors. A piece of fabric might be draped over it as a roof, to extend it or to make it private. The important thing about the constructions seemed not to be so much that they replicated exactly what they represented but that they were functional and that the children could fit into them, thus heightening the “reality” of the experience. The meanings the children attributed to the constructions were usually related to their life experience and enhanced by the use of imaginative play (Monighan-Neurot, 1997; Reifel and Yeatman, 1991; Scales, et al.,1991, p. 156-172).

Figure 5 shows one child, Derek, driving Laura and Leon on a picnic during box play. This “car” construction illustrates Oaklander’s (1988) belief that “Although most children do not understand the word ‘symbol’, they have amazing abilities to understand and use the meaning of the word” (p. 29). Notice the hands holding the invisible steering wheel and the feet manipulating the imaginary pedals.



*Figure 6: Fabric and fibre  
Many headed monster*

During the study, fabrics were often used as everyday household items, curtains etc. as part of playing ‘House’. They could also be used to create a fantasy persona, headband, cloak, sari or, for example, the body of a many headed monster (Figure 6), based on a figure which one of the children had seen in the St. Patrick’s Day parade

This exemplifies Golomb’s (1989) belief that in the development of representational concepts in a three-dimensional medium, young children are aware of a lot more than they depict. Although her study involved work with clay, Golomb’s findings could equally be applied to this study in all three-dimensional areas. Whether the artefacts were

representational or not, they had meaning and relevance to the children. Their imaginations supplied what was difficult to create in reality.

*2. Art influences play and play influences art. They are intertwined and evolve in real time.*

In many cases art was intricately linked with play. Play and art making intertwined and evolved in time thus creating a very real experience for the child as illustrated by the following examples. Roger made large paper Spiderman suits for two of his classmates and asked me to sellotape them over their uniforms. The three of them spent many happy mornings playing Spiderman with Roger redesigning and repairing outfits along the way.

In Laura's drawing of herself (Figure 7), she has acquired a heart shaped navel ornament. There was a degree of wish fulfilment in this as well as coping with the fact that her mother would not allow her to have her navel pierced so the next best thing to having one was to create it in a drawing.



*Figure 7: Laura (age 4)*

*I got my bellybutton pierced*

Art and play continuously overlapped during box construction reinforcing the findings of Reifel and Yeatman (1991) and Drummond (1999). When making a long car with two boxes Edward chose Derek and Ravunas to play with him. 'It's a racing car. Get us petrol quick!' said Derek to Martin who was looking on, thus drawing him into the game. 'Let's go to Mc Donald's' said Edward, exiting from the car. They then joined a small group who were making "pizzas" using play dough.

On the video Martin seems to make his car drawing come alive as he announces “This is a talking car.....It’s taking me to the park...Oo! Oo! ....Car, car, car, come here.” He then sings a little song as he moves his drawing around like a car driving along a road. “I’d like to see a rainbow, I’d like to see a rainbow.”

These examples illustrate how the imagination of the child can transform an object, a piece of fabric or an image into something very real, so real, in fact that the child interacts with it through play. This evokes Warnock’s (1994) analysis of the secondary function of the imagination, that of the image and the symbol (pp. 42-43). Hawkins (1999) put it succinctly when he writes “Play here represents the imagination in action” (p. 37).

### *3. The child becomes totally absorbed in the art/play process*



*Figure 8: Group box construction*

*The supermarket*

The children became totally absorbed in the art/play process (Figure 8). This was evident in the study whether the children were engaged in a solitary or group activity. Sometimes the level of involvement was so strong that when ‘tidy up time’ came, to avoid tears, promises were often necessary to allow the art/play to continue the next day. It is notable that the play was often resumed in a seamless fashion from day to day depending on the theme of the moment and the characters involved, indicating that the children were playing out something of continuous personal interest to them.

### *4. Each child experiences the interrelationships in a highly individual way*

Gardner, Wolf and Smith (1982) and Matthews (1999) commented upon the unique individuality of each child at this age in his/ her approach to the art process as opposed to the “rigid and stereotyped” drawings which can emerge as they get a little older (Rosenblatt and Winner, in Gardner and Perkins, 1989, p. 4). This individuality of artistic

expression, depiction of ideas and use of materials which Gardner (1982) classifies as differences in “cognitive style” (p. 122), was observed during this study as may be seen by the following examples.



*Figure 9: Sonja (age 5)*

*Flying home from Russia*

Compare the pre-symbolic drawing in Figure 1 with the detailed representational style of Figure 9 in which a Russian girl depicts her family returning to Ireland having spent Christmas with her grandmother in Russia. The grandmother's tears are falling on the snow as the family smile happily above her enjoying a central position in the aeroplane.



*Figure 10: Shandon (age 4)*

*Smiling face*

Another example of this individuality of expression is evident in the *Smiling Face* in clay (Figure 10). The child who made this image has curly hair and she obviously enjoyed playing with the clay curls and making them surround the whole face. Notice the detail in the eyes and eyelashes.

Differences in how the children interpreted the same experience also emerged as exemplified by these paintings of a nature walk in spring.



*Figure 11: Alan (age 4)  
I saw a giraffe on our nature walk*

We see in Figures 11 and 12, two paintings which have been highly individualised by the imagination of each child. Alan's depiction of an imaginary giraffe may have sprung from his observation of how tall the trees were (Figure 11). He was obviously aware of what a giraffe looks like because the animal in his painting is quite recognisable. His real life experience of the "tallness" of a giraffe influenced his painting.



*Figure 12: Sean (age 5)  
Me, Brendan and teacher on a nature walk*

Figure 12 depicts quite a different view of the nature walk. This painting features Sean and his friend, Brendan, the smallest boy in the class behind the large, striding figure of the teacher.

Individual differences in the manner in which the children engaged in art activities were also evident. Every morning during activity time each child pursued his/her own creative path. The video shows some children engaging quietly in a task and others talking and interacting continuously during the art process. Ten of the children usually worked quietly without saying much, concentrating on the activity in hand, while others, just over half of the sample, verbalised while they worked.

##### *5. Recurring themes are a common feature in children's art and play*

Favourite themes or schema in the art of the children emerged across various art strands and spilled over into play. Almost half of the children in this study returned to a favourite theme with regularity. Cars, trains, houses, family members, family events, pets and dinosaurs were recurring themes. The following drawings were done by a child whose family did not have a car. Just as Laura created her naval jewel, Derek created his cars.



*Figure 13: Derek (age 5)  
Driving home*



*Figure 14: Derek (age 5)  
The storm*

Derek was fascinated by cars and included some in almost every picture he made. He used the cars to kick-start his creative process. His interest in cars influenced much of his art and play (Figure 5). During the box construction sessions, he invariably wanted to make a car or something related to cars. His work in Figure 13 is interesting from a spatial point of view. The drawing has been turned around several times to negotiate the complex bends 'a complete driving experience'. Notice the difference between the atmosphere of Figure 13 and that in Figure 14. You can almost sense the storm in the drawing in Figure 14 and indeed Derek almost relived the storm as he drew this picture, making banging noises with his crayon, reminiscent of the sound of hailstones "That's the snow coming down from the sky and that's all the cracking on the ground and the

stones. That's the rain and the storm and that's the house blowing and that's the car blowing" (Video transcript).

*6. Children need to establish certain ground rules to maintain the flow of play*

Although some instances of parallel play, as described by Parten (1932), were observed during this study, in general, some form of linkage was necessary to maintain the flow of play. In a shared activity such as the box construction, when narratives met and crossed, there was usually some form of negotiation to establish ground rules of the game. Without this, the flow of interactive play ebbed or else an all out argument ensued.

*7. Fact and fantasy; the imagination plays a vital part in how children interpret their reality.*

Reflecting on, for example, the car constructions and play, the "belly-button" drawing, the painting of the giraffe on the nature walk or the making of a clay nest for the birds, it can be seen that the imagination played an integral part in the art and play of the children, whether it was the "primary" imagination of perceiving the real world or the "secondary" imagination of creating new worlds as discussed by Warnock (1994, pp. 42-43). Although the boundary between reality and fantasy for such young children is not always a definite one, the children in the study were fairly evenly divided into those whose art depicted realistic facts from the life of the child, and those whose art depicted imagined experiences. Yasmin graphically portrays the true story of her sister with the measles (Figure 15).



*Figure 15: Yasmin (age 4)  
My sister has the measles*



*Figure 16: Roger (age 4)  
Gavin's house on fire*

On the other hand, Roger, who had seen a fire engine outside the extinguished fire at the home of his friend, Gavin, painted and drew many imaginary pictures such as Figure 16. Roger had not seen his friend running from the fire. Nevertheless, he was always careful to show Gavin escaping from the fire, thus, it is suggested, allaying some of the fears this event may have aroused in him. Sourkes (1995) writes of the importance of drawing in enabling a child to come to terms with reality. "Drawing often goes beyond the verbal level enabling the emergence of profound realisations" (p. xiii).

In this study imagination is the medium through which each child's experiences of living were transformed into meaningful expression through art or play or both interlinked. Analysis of how the children worked and played during the study, supports the beliefs of Winnicott, (1971) and Warnock (1994) that imagination is inextricably linked to the real life experiences of the child which provide the material for conceptual growth.

Piaget's (1969) theory of cognition emphasises the active role of the child in discovering and constructing reality, evolving from a sensory motor approach through stages of concrete reasoning to the capacity for abstraction. The child who has entered the realm of fantasy through art and play is developing the conceptual framework necessary for abstract and higher order thinking. This theory is supported by Singer's studies (1973), which show statistically that "children who are able to be imaginative have higher IQs and are able to cope better, and that encouraging a child to be imaginative improves his or her ability to cope and learn" (Oaklander, 1988, p. 10).



## Conclusions

Analysis of the data revealed that through the medium of the imagination the art and play of each child in the study could in fact be termed “a slice of life” in that it had meaning and relevance to the life of that child whether gleaned from first hand or secondary experience. Multifaceted and significant interrelationships emerged between the art, play and real life of the young child. These interrelationships were manifested across all strands of the visual arts, tying in with the observations of Haas Dyson (1991), Jameson (1968), Monighan Neurot (1997), Reiffel and Yeatman (1991) and others. On a psychological level (Sourkes 1995; Warnock 1994; Winnicott, 1971), the child is coming to terms with his/her reality and making sense of life as he/she knows it. Expressing this in art or play is important for the child’s development emotionally, cognitively and socially (Piaget, 1962). On an educational level the child is enabled to express experiences, thoughts, fears, dreams and ideas in a safe and fulfilling way, thus developing skills of self-expression and communication.

This relevance to real life was included in the art of children who were still at the pre-symbolic stage together with the art of those who had mastered the use of symbols, supporting Matthew’s assertion that all mark making has meaning for the child (Matthews, 1999, p. 16). Almost half of the children used recurring themes, which greatly influenced their art and play. Art activities often gave rise to play and play created a stimulus to the art process as evidenced by Prentice (1998) and Hawkins (1999).

The nature of the interrelationships varied from those children who depicted a very factual link between their art, their play and their real lives to those whose art and play embodied a blend of fact and fantasy. All of the children had the ability to immerse themselves in the art/play process but like Gardner, Wolf and Smith (1982) the study found a great variation in the approach individual children had to art and play. Forty eight percent were predominantly realists in the way in which their art interrelated with their real lives. Every mark, every form had a connection with something realistic in the child’s life and this extended into the realm of play. This re-creation of real life experience played an important part in how the child thought about and coped with his/her reality. The remaining fifty two percent were predominantly fantasiers, (not in a pejorative sense), in their capacity to continually extend their art beyond the real into the world of fantasy. These children tended to intertwine their play and art as the art was in progress, creating an evolving fantasy world.

Overall, the study demonstrated how the art/play process interrelating with the life of the child, can be a source of self expression, creative imagination, abstract thought, self discipline and experimentation, as discussed by Monighan-Neurot (1997). An awareness

of the themes emerging from this study should enhance our understanding of the art of young children and its relationship to their play and their real lives. This has implications for the ways in which art and play are regarded in the junior classes.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

#### **Understanding the Value of Art and Play**

Most teachers understand the value of art/play activities to the overall development of the child. However, when faced with the task of introducing Irish junior infants to nine curriculum areas, which include setting them on the road to literacy and numeracy, one might be forgiven for being tempted to shorten activity time.

This study reveals how absorbed children are in their building, designing, modeling, drawing and role-playing and how relevant it all is to their real lives. They are learning through their art and play. Playfulness within learning creates an effective learning climate promoting concentration, participation and assimilation. It is likely that children who have a rich and satisfying environment in which to express themselves through art and play will be happy in school and develop positive attitudes to what goes on there.

#### **Experiencing All Strands of the Visual Arts Curriculum**

The encouraging of self expression through art and play has psychological and educational benefits for the child (Monighan-Neurot, 1997; Sourkes, 1995). In some classrooms, art and play may be curtailed due to time pressures, mess with materials, resource availability, external exposed curricular expectations and fear of lack of teacher control. The depiction of real life events is important for the child as he/she tries to make sense of his/her world. Opportunities should be provided to allow this development to take place. Activity time in the infant classroom should have a range of art activities available to the children which they can fully explore, moving fluidly from the realm of art into play and back again. Therefore the question of stimulus, time and materials to create art and play deserves special attention as part of the curriculum. The sensitive exploration and stimulation of ideas by the teacher helps to fuel creativity. Enough time is needed for the children to form and elaborate on their ideas. The opportunity to express these ideas through the different media of the six art strands should also be afforded.

#### **Appreciation of “Scribbling”**

The fact that intense meaning to the child was to be found in pre-symbolic as well as symbolic art also has implications for educational practice. The ‘scribbling’ normally associated with pre-symbolic art is a necessary part of the child’s development artistically and cognitively. This study supports the views of Matthews (1999) that these marks mean something to their creator and that the sensory experience of producing them is part of

the whole process. As a result, the infant teacher and pre service teacher may need to spend some time observing what the child at the pre-symbolic art stage is really depicting. Some interaction and conversation is necessary here, together with ample time to allow the child to develop at his/her own pace.

### **Recognising and Catering for Different Cognitive Styles in Art**

The emergence of different cognitive styles within the infant class will probably come as no surprise to most practitioners who are used to devising a programme suited to the needs of many. Perhaps this should be extended into the realm of art teaching.

### **Pre-service Teacher Education**

As facilitator and observer the infant teacher can maintain the flow of the activity without threatening the child's 'ownership' of it. Sensitive teacher presence is vital to children's creative involvement in art making as Potter and Edens (2004) showed when lack of teacher involvement resulted in diminished pupil interest in art activities. It is important that trainee teachers develop the understanding and skills necessary to create fertile conditions in which play and art can flourish with encouragement to try out art and play related activities during teaching practice.

Unless pre-service education courses fully address the merits and management of play, young teachers will feel unable to organise meaningful play experiences and then feel guilty about allowing their classes to have generous play allowances. "A complex dance of intuition and intellect is called for on the part of the teacher." As "scaffolders" of children's learning, it is "important for teachers to develop the ability to apprehend the qualities of human intelligence, creativity and the capacity for integration as a whole person in each child who comes to school" (Monighan-Neurot, 1997, p. 125-126). The magical world of art and play draws on the child's intelligence, imagination, creativity and social skills in a worthwhile and enjoyable learning experience.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> See the perspectives of educational researchers (Hawkins, 1999; Monighan-Neurot, 1991, 1997; and Prentice, 1998), psychologists (Gardner, 1982; Sourkes, 1995; and Warnock, 1994) and writers on children's art (Brittain, 1979; Duncum, 1986; Jameson, 1968, Ivashkevich, 2006; Matthews, 1999; Robertson, 1987; Pearson, 1993; and Wilson, 1974).

<sup>2</sup> The classroom contained a large central area and various corners in which the children could play. Equipment included large-boxes for construction work, an art table which could seat eight pupils with a supply of paper, paint and assorted paintbrushes, another

table with paper, glue, scissors, crayons, pastels, pencils and card, a box containing large strips of colourful fabric that could be draped to make clothes, tents, etc. and a modelling table with one of the following available daily to the children: play dough, plasticine, model magic or self-hardening clay. A collection of pictorial art books and slides of works of art were regularly used. The importance of a good supply of art materials to encourage children to participate in art based activities was highlighted by Edens and Potter (2004) who surmised that a probable reason for the lack of time pre-school children chose to spend at art in their study was the paucity of materials supplied.

<sup>3</sup> On the observational days, as the children involved themselves in drawing, painting, clay modelling or construction, I circulated amongst them making notes on choice of theme, relevance to the child's real life, creativity and use of imagination, choice of medium, method of working, level of concentration, interaction with the work in progress, interaction with the other children. Sometimes I recorded remarks made by the children about their own art- work on the reverse side of the work for easy reference. All notes were taken while the work was in progress or had just been completed. On occasions, fabric and fibre were introduced either as part of a construction or as clothing. The art was usually self-induced, something personal to the child. At other times, the art was in response to a stimulus which I initiated. Some of the artefacts, for example, the large-scale box constructions, were made, played with and dismantled during the morning activity session, having first been photographed or filmed. Mini interviews were video recorded during some drawing sessions and later transcribed.

<sup>4</sup> Once the children had chosen or been assigned to an activity whether painting, drawing, clay modelling, or box construction, their inspiration was usually self initiated and their creativity took on a momentum of its own, sometimes fuelled by their interaction with their peers. Occasionally I would encourage the development of an idea by questioning but I was careful that they should retain ownership of the game or art activity. A certain fluidity between activities sometimes occurred with the emergence of new ideas or simply the impression that something else might be more fun. It was not uncommon, for example, for a child to go to the modelling table to make "pizza" to bring into the "restaurant" box construction.

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