



CRAFTING LIVING INQUIRY WITH A QUILT OF CHILDREN'S IMAGES

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Abstract: Embodied encounters in and with crafting as method led to knowing with making in this research. A crafted bricolage of photographs from young children (aged 15 months to 5 years) was created at their early childhood centre. The children's photographs became material for further thinking as they were transferred to fabric and combined into a quilt that was tie quilted by children and the researcher as artist/researcher/teachers (Springgay, Irwin, Leggo, & Gouzouasis, 2008). Our craft processes in quilt making initiated ongoing integrated art-making, teaching/learning, and conversations with and without words. Much research in early childhood has a focus on the child, but what do children focus on, and how might they be more than participants? Rich experiences throughout the co-creation of the quilt as a living inquiry provided spaces for learning and knowledge making. Craft as research *and* a piece of art to display for the learning community provoked questions and opened understandings about and with young children, their preferences, and their capacity as co-researchers.

Keywords: craft; quilting; photography; early childhood; a/r/tography

Quilting Research



Figure 1. The quilted images

The use of photography for quilt-making in this research evoked storytelling and embodied learning through living inquiry (Springgay, Irwin, Leggo, & Gouzouasis, 2008) as very young children (aged 15 months to 5 years of age) were becoming artist/researcher/teachers (Springgay, et al., 2008). The layering of fabric and quilting in research made a way to combine “disjointed elements” (Koelsch, 2012, p. 823) that are not linear and can be read from “multiple directions” (Koelsch, 2012, p. 823). The very young children in this research were not yet “readers,” and had multiple perspectives of their early childhood centre. Crafting to co-create a quilt by “piecing” (Witzling, 2009, p. 632) their image patches became a way to engage with the multiple and unconnected stories in their photographs. The children became co-researchers as they produced and presented their images, and made them into a quilt with associated activities. The quilt became a piece of art to display for the learning community. This craft process and

artifact raised questions, inspired repeat experiences for children, and opened understandings about young children, their preferences, and capacity for becoming artist/researcher/teachers (Springgay, et al., 2008).

Quilting to Include Young Children in Research

I am an artist and crafter. Fabric, fiber, and textiles are familiar to me and used in my art practice and research (Peterken, 2009; 2015; 2017; 2018). I have also quilted fabric in clothing and furnishings, and made quilts in community settings. In my work in early childhood education the arts are part of everyday pedagogy, and the children in this research and I had previously explored a variety of art materials and methods while I was their teacher. My understanding of their capacity to produce knowledge and their familiarity with making art and being artists, allowed me to offer opportunities for sharing their perspectives, and to co-research with me. As an adult and a prior staff member at this early childhood centre, I was aware of the position of power that existed in my research with them. There had been multiple times where the children held power during inquiry learning and had taught me about their perspectives in my time as their educator. Trusting children as makers supports shifts in power structures. These shifts allow for open ended, playful learning opportunities that provide spaces for children to present their understandings through craft and the arts as knowing in the making (Ellsworth, 2005). In this research, I wanted to include children as more than participants and let them teach me about their worlds, and wondered how I might do this.

My connection with these very young children had previously allowed me to feel and understand their intent even when they did not speak many words. I was interested in who wanted to participate and what they might show me as we researched together as artist/researcher/teachers (Springgay, et al., 2008) and was confident that this would be evident as I worked with them. I obtained Human Ethics approval, and informed consent from families, and the individual young children gave assent at each stage of their involvement in this research. This extended to use of their images and the photographs of the research process, including of the children engaging with the quilt. I wished to work ethically together, and to give the children opportunities to choose what we worked on and show their preferences. As an adult and teacher we had worked together many times, so from experience I knew that they would quickly demonstrate their willingness (or not) to join in, and those who were older would also talk to me about what they wanted to do. The emergent curriculum of the centre meant that children, staff and families had constant input into learning activities, and were considered partners in learning. These children were able to make their ideas and preferences known moment

by moment in this setting, and the same principles applied as I respected the right of each individual in this research to be involved (or not) throughout the project. The relationships we had were more important to me than any research outcome. My simple invitations meant it was possible for any of the participants to be involved or to decline at any time. After a short explanation at an informal gathering with the children and educators, I invited the children to show me if they would like to come and participate as I held out the camera to them and later, showed them the quilting basket of materials, asking “who would like to work on the quilt?” Those who were interested at that moment came up to me and often held the basket or quilt. My close relationship with these children and this community opened a way for inquiry, making processes, and a crafted product as some of the children chose to be active researchers of daily life in their environment.

A Dream of Crafting a Quilt of Children’s Images

Pondering on the research process I might use to include these children as more than participants, I woke very early one morning after a very vivid dream. In this dream I saw the children from this centre and myself working on a quilt that was made of their photographs. I could see calico and coloured fabric, sensed the warmth of a quilt, and that young children could participate in tying off ribbons threaded through to hold the three layers, “essentially fabric sandwiches” (Witzling, 2009, p. 632), in a tie quilt – the top holds pieced patches of their images, the inner batting is for warmth and loft, and the underside of calico and binding around the edges hold it together.

I had begun organizing my research to consider young children’s photographs, but with my dream of making a quilt I had an opening for the quilt to become an arts based research project that children could be part of. Now very young children could be involved in making the quilt beyond taking the photographs. From the feeling and images that my dream provoked I wondered about these children becoming co-researchers, artists, and teachers as they engaged with me from their perspectives. Quilt making as research, where “heterogeneous elements can (must) be brought together, that no one authorial voice predominates” (Handforth & Taylor, 2016, p. 638) suited the collaborative collection of the children’s images. Through the dream I found a method of making to craft this inquiry. In addition to the fabrics needed for a quilt, I was able to procure large eyed needles and thin ribbons in multiple colours that children could manipulate to make a tie quilt, similar to those I had made for babies and small children in the past. Quilting can be a long, detailed process, but a tie quilt is much quicker and fairly simple, with thread (in this case coloured ribbons) sewn through all three layers and tied off with a double knot to “leave a tuft” (Witzling, 2009, p. 632). In our tie quilt, the ends of the ribbons dangle on the upper layer for decoration.



Figure 2. Making the tie quilt

Quilting with Images

To take the photographs for the quilt, children used their bodies, with a camera as an extension, to make images, sometimes with my assistance. Ellsworth (2005) asserts, “a body in the process of learning is a body blurred by its own indeterminacy and by its openness to an elsewhere and to an otherwise” (p. 122). The images were not all what I imagined might be taken, but I was open to any image they produced. In wondering about including these young children as co-artist/researcher/teachers (Springgay, et al., 2008), and making a tie quilt as shown in my dream, I realized that this project would be a “means to inquire in the world” (Irwin & Springgay, 2008, p. xxviii) for the children. Researchers have also found that “participatory, visual methodologies allow... children to portray their own experiences, these approaches enable children to speak for themselves” (Vecchio, Dhillon, & Ulmer, 2017, p. 139). Some photographs included very specific ideas held by the children. The images contained the view and

angle the children wanted to use and their words were sometimes written on the quilt. I returned and revisited with the children and spent time to clarify their ideas until they were happy with what was on the quilt.

These children in the process of learning while being, belonging, and becoming (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2009) were co-researchers as we explored what was important to them at their centre. The content of the photographs was often what the children were with and using, but some children were much more specific in their choice of subject. I was taken (led by the hand) to a chosen particular place with them or implored to acquire something they wanted. Taking a photograph, they were shown the image in the display and chose what to keep. They presented their daily life to me. They taught me about their lives. It was a gift. Quilting with the children, and each child individually, provided opportunities for us to point out and think about their photograph, and the photographs others had taken. Children at play can have the greatest potential for social variance (Ellsworth, 2005), so I used playful experiences with our crafting to create places where we could use quilting and the quilt to “dip into the spaces between knowledges already made” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 142). Many of the very young children did not speak many words, but pointed and hugged sections of the quilt and ran to get toys or items from the quilt images as we worked on it. Some grabbed a camera and took new images of their surroundings. During the whole process we contemplated the places and the things they showed and felt were important.

Ulkuniemi (2007), an artist/researcher created an “Enchanted Carpet of Holy Daily Life” (p. 48) where her images taken over two days, in a home and work setting, were put together into a carpet to convey the sacred nature of daily life in a family. In a similar process we created the quilt with meanings that are in and in between “images, materials, situations, space and time” (Irwin & Springgay, 2008, p. xix) and the added words that opened thinking. My research journal recorded these wonderings about quilting as research:

Interesting how just in quilt making, pieces can fit in a number of places – decisions! Where is the BEST fit? What is my purpose and how to best get everything to line up and fit and then patch together, pin, baste, sew, pad and line and strengthen with the quilting stitches. Each piece is washed and pressed before use. Good quality to start with. Perfectly cut and lined up. Stitched evenly and with care. Pure cotton, pre-shrunk so no problems later. Great care in the preliminary stages makes all the difference. Am I thinking about making a quilt or doing/reporting research?

Making with craft as method while researching combined these processes and there were ongoing conversations as we quilted, with children, staff and families. This created a research community where we were willing to share ideas and experiences. In one instance, a child brought in a photograph of her dog (very important to her) from home to show me and kept it in her locker until she saw me again. She was sharing this image as artist/researcher/teacher (Springgay, et al., 2008). It was natural for the families to contribute to the activities at this centre and for children to bring in items from home. Taking photographs in this research connected with her home life where she and her family took photographs of important things to them. The children as artist/researcher/teachers would hold the quilt, ask (not always with words) to take photographs, quilt, and some wrote on it, and we had conversations about it. The quilt provoked ongoing processes where art making, teaching/learning, and writing were integrated with a/r/tography (Irwin, 2003; Irwin & de Cosson, 2004; Springgay, et al., 2008). The images, the quilt making process, and the researcher's field notes and reflections became openings (Springgay, et al., 2008) to rich experiences throughout the co-creation of the quilt. This created spaces for learning and knowledge construction for the children and also for me as they shared their perspectives through craft making.

Quilting as Artist/Researcher/Teachers

Irwin and Springgay (2008) elucidate that "knowing (theoria), doing (praxis), and making (poesis) as philosophised by Aristotle are three forms of thought important to a/r/tography" (p. xxiii) where artist and researcher and teacher selves are taken up and moved across and in between. Thinking, making, acting, and understanding added and folded with/in each other with these images, crafting of the quilt and the added words combined in this research. This methodology of intuition (Irwin & Springgay, 2008) allowed these children and I to craft responses and notice what was important or interesting. We worked within the contiguity (Springgay, et al., 2008) of interconnected artist/researcher/teacher selves as we shifted across and between all of these for multiple perspectives in doing, crafting, telling stories and writing. There was an "evolution of research questions and understandings" (Irwin & Springgay, 2008, p. xxix) that I, and the children, were wondering with as we made the quilt. What children found important in daily life at their centre was the focus of their photographs, and this provoked further questioning about their preferences, capacities, and of how children might be a/r/tographers with crafting a quilt.

Opportunities for openings, understanding, and interrelations were with and in between the images, the quilt, our bodies, thinking, and the research process where "meaning un/creates itself" (Irwin & Springgay, 2008, p. xxx) and accesses further ways for making sense. Crafting the fabric into a quilt made the children's images material for

feeling and seeing their daily life at the centre. There are images of grapes on a plate which were that child's favourite food, the ducklings that the children had seen hatch that week, toys and materials to play with, musical instruments used in a favourite activity, the outside play area, even a bed with a blanket and teddy bear ready for sleep (see *Figure 1*). The attached patches with images of daily life became a metaphor for the interconnected perspectives we had. Openings (Springgay, et al., 2008) for thinking were also in the making of the quilt from the cut, pieced, and stitched fabric photographs. A quilt can bring warmth and comfort (Witzling, 2009) and the "cuts, tears, ruptures or cracks that resist predictability, comfort and safety" (Irwin & Springgay, 2008, p. xxx) in the quilt also opened conversations and movement of thinking about what is important to a young child.



Figure 3. Children pointing out images

Encounters that shook us up and demanded attention incited shifts in thinking. The children took hold of the quilt and used it to wrap around them as a group, and when I turned around and saw this I felt their ownership of it. These were their images, their understandings, their quilt. Through their researcher images they taught me about their lives. They pointed out their images while we quilted, went to the quilt and looked at or pointed to various images, and sometimes ran off while quilting to re-enact something pictured in the quilt. These actions drew my attention to the impact crafting can have, even when the quilt was dragged away or abandoned. Their teacher selves instructed me in their understandings and preferences, often without words. As artists they decided on the focus, angle and subject of the images, and co-created the quilt with the photographs and ribbons they chose. The excess (Springgay, et al., 2008) from the quilt included all that was lying among, beyond and with, and that which was left aside, not taken up. It all remained. The excess waited as possibilities and potentialities

to be noticed. It is still in the remains; the images discarded by children, fabric cut away, writing deleted and thoughts floating out of reach. All part of what was left in/visible, what was un/felt, in our artist/researcher/teacher (Springgay, et al., 2008) un/knowings.

Connecting and Binding with Craft

The movement, connection, and binding of diverse and disjointed elements (Koelsch, 2012) together in a quilt was a medium for conversation, conversations that did not always have words, with/about the images as they were re/presented. Nieberding (2017) proposes that quilting “generates socially significant visual texts” (p. 9) and this was evident in the images, conversations and playful episodes that emerged from the quilt. The following photograph and section from the quilt are an example of the contiguous nature of the children’s engagement in this research.



Figure 4. Ballerina Book

This image of the page in the “ballet book” was taken by a girl aged 4 years and 5 months. She expressed her engagement and delight in the dancing experiences at the centre. There was a group of children who danced, often with scarves or costumes, to classical music and looked at books showing dancers. This girl carefully selected the content for her photograph, taking time to find the exact page she liked. She then

placed it in a particular way on the couch in order to frame her image. She talked to me, and to the other children present, about the pages she considered and that this was her “favourite page,” so she was sure it was the correct choice.

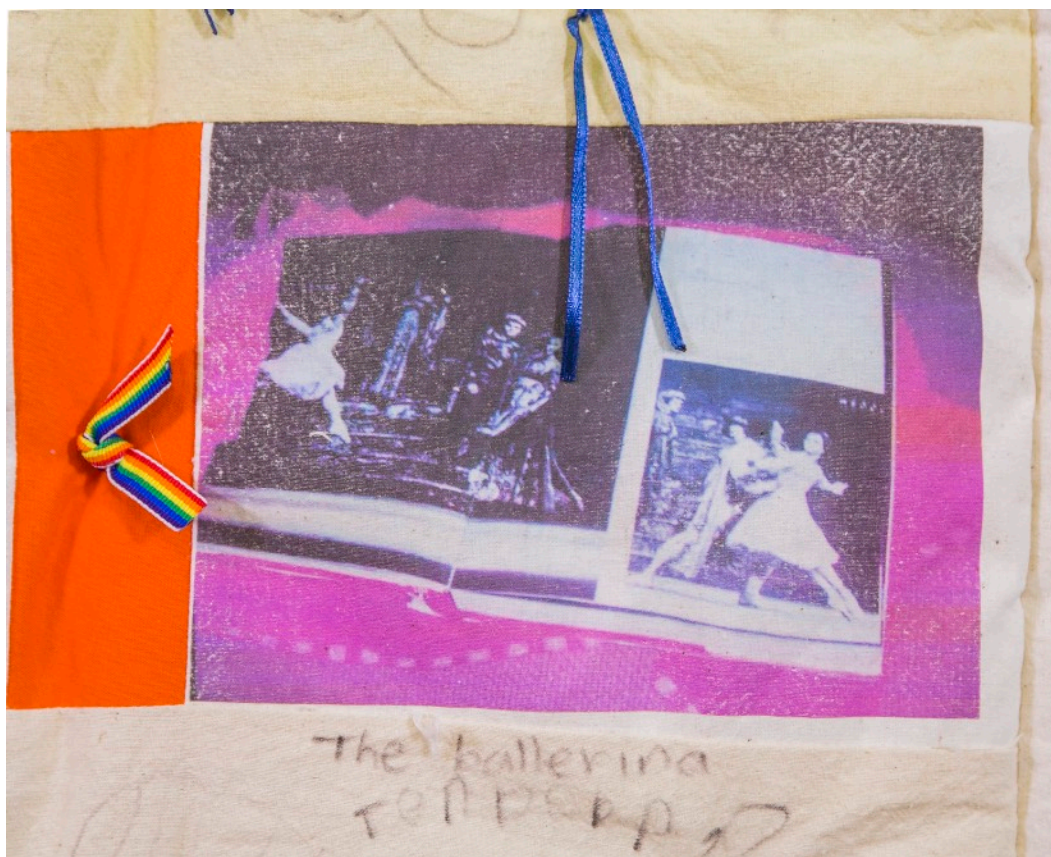


Figure 5. The Ballerinas

When I returned to the centre with the quilt ready for quilting together there were more conversations about this photograph being taken, and dancing. As the children viewed this image they talked briefly about these activities – “Dance!”, “Ballet”, “Get music!”, “Scarves”, “Let’s go!”- and acted out dancing once again. This is not just a photograph of a book. It re/presents the experiences, preferences, and abilities of this girl and the children as a community. When a photograph was taken (or approved of) by each child, that child had ownership and was in control of their learning and of that part of the research. Our work together was also a “dance” as we co-created meaning and belonging through a/r/tography (Springgay, et al., 2008) in an emergent process through the photography and crafting.

In the making of the quilt the stories and images developed meaning. Relationships were created and enhanced. I learned more about the children and their stories and images each time they repeated the dancing, and so taught me. The

learning and connections were enhanced as props, scarves, and music also depicted on the quilt, were added. This did not always require words as children ran and collected the materials, placed the scarves, turned on music and joyfully danced. This research supports craft as a means for providing “the opportunity to combine the very human drive to create with the need to find value in daily interactions.” (Hagedorn & Springgay, 2013, p. 27), highlighting the potential of young children as they co-created meaning and belonging with a quilt that showed daily life at their centre.



Figure 6. Ballet, scarves and music



Figure 7. Putting the quilt together

Time spent doing craft, making and communicating in a variety of ways, led to understanding and knowing more about ourselves and each other, recognizing that “quilting is a powerful socially communicative practice” (Nieberding, 2017, p. 8). The photographs, quilting and quilt opened conversations with and without words, connections, options and thinking about the work and play of children and their community. In these ways, material knowing in research was accessed in relation because “touch expresses active involvement with the subject matter...it draws attention to sensory experiences and knowledge that is interconnected with our bodies and with others” (Irwin and Springgay, 2008, p. xxi). As we quilted, our artist hands and fingers threaded ribbon and moved the needle through fabric. The embodied nature of craft brings a range of benefits to those involved and among other things, addresses “the need for personal gratification and identity-building; the desire to build a community with shared values...” (Hagedorn & Springgay, 2013, p. 12).

The opportunity for young children to take the lead, researching and teaching me as they photographed, quilted, drew and made marks/wrote on the quilt (sometimes while sprawled on it) gave them ownership of this research product. They spread it on the floor, used it to tell each other about what they would like to do and showed their

images to others while it was displayed. This research was a “search for...a balance between rules and limitations...and the real emotion and passion of learning” (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 199) as children participated in research, quilting and sharing daily life through craft making.



Figure 8. Writing on the quilt (Peterken, 2017)

The quilt was left, on occasions, at the centre during the making process and the Director documented some of the interactions with it and these were also shared. The quilt had its own rich life comprised of the images and stories brought to it, created by it and taken from it as a contiguous process. These young children created images that were quilted to present and extend their perspectives, educational experiences, and connections. Sharing the images and quilt with the centre community at an initial event and as it was displayed near the entrance allowed families to be involved and support their artist/researcher/teacher children.

The engagement of the children who took the lead, teaching adults about what they knew, gave further life to this inquiry. The quilt also provided a medium for educators to see children's views and to expand on these in future programming and interaction in the daily life of the centre. Participation in crafting brings “a sense of



Figure 9. Children sharing quilt stories

celebration, of looking forward to the next project” (Hagedorn & Springgay, 2013, p. 26), which aligns with this research. Children were constantly making with materials in this early childhood education context and quilting was an extension of this. Making for research is a process, and was congruent with the culture of this early childhood centre where an emergent curriculum was adopted. Children were considered my co-artist/researcher/teachers with a/r/tography (Springgay, et al., 2008); teaching me, themselves and their community. I am left wondering: “What about other places and other children?” I look forward to the future possibility of engaging in similar inquiries, making craft for research with young children as artist/researcher/teachers (Springgay, et al., 2008) in early childhood settings. Even though “some knowings cannot be conveyed through language” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 156), they can be crafted through making as method, including making a quilt.

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