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Critical Approaches to Arts-Based Research

**Guest Editors**
Anne Harris
Mary Ann Hunter
Clare Hall

**THEME**

Arts based research (ABR), its products, processes and critical theorising have come a long way in recent times. Nuanced distinctions indicate the development of the field, as arts-informed research, arts-based research, practice-led research, applied research, and creative participatory action research all claim different relationships with the art and criticality present in such innovative scholarship. Finally, it seems, we are moving away from a defensive stance regarding arts based research and its ‘validity’, and toward a celebration of this proliferation of diverse ways of knowing, theorising and doing research. This ‘coming of age’ is evident in this special issue, which urges readers to move beyond binarised notions of scientific ‘versus’ arts based research that still at times dominates academic research environments and conversations, and outmoded practice/theory divides. For we co-editors and for the authors here, theorising is indeed a creative practice, and goes hand-in-hand with the epistemological and ontological potential of arts-making methods. This issue celebrates the opening of new doors in theorising innovative arts based research from a range of global contexts, theoretical and epistemological frameworks, and inter/disciplines. We avoid any attempt to codify or limit the parameters of what contemporary arts based research is or can be. Indeed, we seek the opposite: to highlight its ever-expanding possibilities.
The essays here aim to encourage critical analysis and dialogue about the objects and subjects of arts based research for contemporary times, poststructuralist, posthuman and other critical approaches to arts based research, and the interdisciplinary application of performative and practice-led research in transferable methodological models. We are pleased to be able to include digital assets with many of the articles in this special issue. Indeed, the layered and multimodal complexity of arts based ‘outputs’ or artefacts is one of its rich distinguishing features, and it requires commitment from editors and publishers to not always demand a ‘reduction’ back into text-based forms, a diminishment of many forms of ABR. For this we thank the UNESCO editorial and production team, and hope you enjoy this contribution to the critical development of the arts based research field.
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Painting canvases and performing social justice: The transformative possibilities of arts based research in Indigenous Australian studies with primary children

Elizabeth Mackinlay
Associate Professor
School of Education
The University of Queensland

In 2012, 80 primary children in a southwest Brisbane school collaborated to paint four large canvases to represent the knowledge and understanding they had gained from their classroom work in Indigenous Australian Studies. The canvases are an aesthetic representation of the ‘head’ and ‘heart’ knowledge the children acquired about contemporary Indigenous Australian peoples and cultures, and importantly, their relationships to them. In this chapter, I explore the canvases as an example of arts based research concerned with the creation of an expressive form to “secure an empathic participation in the lives of others and in the situation studied” (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 9). Of interest here, are the transformative possibilities of arts based research and classroom practice for rethinking social justice in education and the context of Indigenous Australian Studies not as a noun, but rather as a verb (Griffiths, 2013) – as performance and praxis that can be used “like a travel card, something one can use to get somewhere” (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 9). Using a bricolage of narrative and creative-analytic writing techniques in combination with visual imagery and video material from the children, I invite you to enter into the “somewhere” of the
canvases to experience the potential of arts based praxis for enabling children “to cross the empty spaces” (Greene, 1995, p. 3) between themselves and Indigenous Australian peoples to imagine and bring to life a more socially just and reconciled Australia.

REFERENCES


KEY WORDS

Indigenous Australia, reconciliation, social justice, arts education

BIOGRAPHY

Elizabeth Mackinlay is an Associate Professor in the School of Education at the University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia where she teaches Indigenous Education and co-convenes Gender Studies. Her book, Disturbances and dislocations: Teaching and learning Aboriginal women’s music and dance, was published in 2007 by Peter Lang. Liz has published many chapters and articles in the fields of ethnomusicology, Indigenous education, music and arts education, and feminist studies. Liz is currently working on a book titled Teaching and learning like a feminist: Stories of experience in higher education to be published by Sense Publishers. Liz is currently the co-editor of the Australian Journal of Indigenous Education (AJIE).
INTRODUCTION

Gather round people I’ll tell you a story  
An eight year long story of power and pride  
British Lord Vestey and Vincent Lingiari 
Were opposite men on opposite sides  
From little things big things grow  
From little things big things grow  
(Carmody & Kelly 1993)

The narrative I want to share with you in this chapter is not an eight-year-old story, but one which begins, and is grounded in, the struggle for and recognition of Indigenous sovereignty and rights to land that this well-known Australian song remembers. The song ‘From Little Things Big Things Grow’ was co-written by artists Paul Kelly and Kev Carmody (Carmody & Kelly 1993). Released by the pair in 1993, the song is at once protest and celebration as it tells the inspiring story of the Gurindji people’s struggle for equality and land rights after their ‘walk off’ at the Wave Hill property in the Northern Territory of Australia in 1966. It is a song replete with the possibility for change and action and it plays as a soundtrack in this story about arts education and social justice. i

In 2012, I sang the ‘From Little Things big Things Grow’ story to begin a Unit of Work with Grade 5 children aimed at exploring the ways in Indigenous Australians have contributed
to and changed the shape of Australian society. Next door in the Grade 4 classroom, the same song was used to begin a Unit of Work aimed at building understanding about the nature of the contemporary relationship Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have with the land and sea. The setting of this narrative then, is a primary school in the southwest suburbs of Brisbane, the capital of Queensland in the north of Australia. The main characters in this story are eighty children in Grades 4 and 5. The main plotline brings the Australian national history curriculum together with arts based pedagogy as transformative education to make space for the kind of “wide awakeness” to social justice that Maxine Greene (1977) speaks of. The backdrops which frame this story are four 1.2m x 1.8m collaborative art canvases created by the children which aim to take us, like a travel card, to the “somewhere” (Barone & Eisner 2012, p. 9) of their learning journey in Indigenous Australian Studies (see Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4).

The central question underpinning the “somewhere” in this chapter is, what is the potential of arts based praxis to enact transformative education to enable children “to cross the empty spaces” (Greene 1995, p. 3) between themselves and Indigenous Australian peoples to imagine and bring to life a more socially just and reconciled Australia? Ultimately, this chapter hopes to contribute to our understanding of how and why arts based practice in curricula and classrooms matters as performative of and the possibility for social justice in the lives of children and their learning.
“For a new day rises”, Grade 5A use collage to depict the way they understand important moments in history where Indigenous and non-Indigenous people fought for social justice. Watch the video to hear the children explain their understandings in more detail (Figure 2).
Figure 3
“Living sea and country”, Grade 4A paint their understandings of connections to place might mean for Indigenous Australians.

Figure 4
“Over sea, sky and land”, Grade 4B put onto the canvas their narrative of Indigenous Australian connections to country.
The collaborative canvases represent children's creative capacity for knowledge creation and meaning-making, and for going beyond business as usual in what and how we might enter into a relationship with Indigenous Australian peoples, knowledge and cultures in education contexts. By necessity then, this chapter evokes the same sense of creativity and is presented as an example of arts based research. In keeping with the concept of story and in an attempt to resist presenting “smothering scripts and machine-made formulations” (Greene 1977, p. 72) of academic writing, this chapter uses a bricolage of narrative and creative-analytic writing techniques which includes “playlets” (Lather 1991; Stewart & Mackinlay 2003) and research or data poetry (Richardson 1994). The chapter is structured as scenes and features dialogue between theory and practice; the voices you will hear are those of the children themselves drawn from my conversations with them, and, my voice and theirs chatting with education theorists Maxine Greene and Morwenna Griffiths. It is at once research text and aesthetic expression, which, hopes to “invite people in and open spaces for thinking about the social that elude us now” (Richardson, in Richardson & St. Pierre 2005, p. 962). It explores the canvases as methodology in arts
based research in education which, through the creation of an expressive form, seeks to “secure an empathic participation in the lives of others and in the situation studied” (Barone & Eisner 2012, p. 9). As a reader, I invite you to step into this arts based process and pedagogy with me and experience in Scene 1 my own awakening to social justice as an arts educator-researcher in relationship with Indigenous Australian peoples and the personal-pedagogical-political educational context in which I currently find myself. Scene 2 calls you to listen to the voices of the children and Scene 3 creates an imaginary conversation and commentary between Maxine Greene, Morwenna Griffiths and me on the ways in which the collaborative canvases might come close to performing the work of social justice.

**SCENE 1: POSITIONING SELVES, SITES AND STUDIES II**

Vestey was fat with money and muscle  
*Beef was his business, broad was his door*  
Vincent was lean and spoke very little  
*He had no bank balance, hard dirt was his floor*  
*From little things big things grow*  
*From little things big things grow*  
*(Carmody & Kelly 1993)*
She looks down the platform, and then at her watch. She is waiting for a train. Staring at the tracks she wonders where she has come from and where she is going. She feels like she has been travelling since yesterday became tomorrow, and yet she senses there is still a long way to go. The screeching sound of metal on metal startles her; this is her train and it's time to climb aboard. Trying to remain invisible and unseen she walks with her head down looking for the right seat to place her-self. She stumbles as the train lurches and heavily sits down.
Click clack click clack. Her mind reaches back to remember the things she has packed in her suitcase. A PhD in ethnomusicology – check. A PhD in education – check. But does that make her an arts educator? Click clack click clack. Back to the dreaming board. A childhood memory of grandmother’s singing softly ‘Two little girls in blue dear’. Bright lights of a musical stage, The King and I and a bunch of sailors. And then a French horn in her hand, an orchestral song in her head, and a university music degree to tightly hold.

The train lunges to the left. She has to hang on tight to keep herself on the seat. Her body is moving to a different rhythm now. She hears the melodies of mermaids. She hears their voices
rising high above the ceremony ground. She hears stories of their strength, care and nurturance. She hears that song, dance, country and ceremony make women strong. And she feels as though she might

have arrived. But the women around her are black. She is white. Her husband is black and white. And their children black, white, black and white. She is not sure if she sitting in the right seat. Sometimes it’s comfortable. But mostly she is not sure whether she is the driver. Or the passenger.
Without warning the train begins to slow down. The dizziness of the past becomes the clarity of here and now. It is indeed the colonial present and she knows there is no room for white naivety or complacency. She steps down off the train and can’t help but sing the songline of experience and emotion she shares with her Aboriginal family because she knows now where she is going. To a classroom where dance, art, drama and music rock her foundations and in the rolling a movement to somewhere else. Where she can care and where she can love. Where teaching and learning touches hearts as well as minds. And the arts become locations of possibility for social justice. For her family. For all of this. And so much more.
While the focus of this chapter is on arts based educational research as methodology for social justice, it is important to contextualize the educational landscape within which this work was performed and painted. I am a non-Indigenous educator teaching Indigenous studies to predominantly non-Indigenous children. The personal-political positioning I have presented is a most necessary one for questions have long been, and continue to be asked about, the inadequacies of Western paradigms and non-Indigenous people in the portrayal of Indigenous realities and Indigenous ways of knowing (e.g., Bell 1994; Cowlishaw 1993; Langton 1993; Mackinlay 2003; Moreton-Robinson 2000, 2004a, 2004b; Nakata 2006); the role and reinstatement of Indigenous peoples in the production, legitimation, reproduction and dissemination of Indigenous Australian Studies (e.g., Nakata 2007; Yunkaporta & McGinty 2009); and, how Indigenous Australian Studies is taught, who should teach it and for what purpose (Chalmers 2005; Craven 2012; Ma Rhea & Russell 2012). It is inherently troubling and troubled by the relationships it invokes (Gandhi 1998) between the white power and privilege we hold as non-Indigenous researchers in Australia, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and knowledges we work with, and the tangled up colonial past and present in which we find ourselves.

In response to and guided by the 'Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians', adopted federally by the Ministerial Council for Education in December 2008 (MCEETYA 2008), the Australian curriculum (ACARA 2013) seeks to bring the shared history of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians into school communities, curricula and classrooms. Both the Declaration and the Australian national curriculum make it clear that the central role of education is to build “a democratic, equitable and just society—a society that is prosperous, cohesive and culturally diverse” and that both Australian society and its education systems value “Australia’s Indigenous cultures as a key part of the nation’s history, present and future” (MCEETYA 2008, p. 4).
The Australian national curriculum enacts these principles through the embedding of three cross-curriculum priorities across all learning areas: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, Australian’s engagement with Asia, and Sustainability (ACARA 2013). The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cross curriculum priority is mandatory and requires teachers to include local and national historical and contemporary Indigenous Australian perspectives and ways of knowing, being and doing in what and how they teach – the social justice imperative is explicit and relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians are central to the reconciliation pedagogy (c. f., MacGill & Wyeld 2009) that the national curriculum puts in place. However, for most teachers, this poses a significant challenge, particularly given that “they themselves are likely to have been deprived of valid Indigenous perspectives during their studies in compulsory and tertiary years” (Rose 2012, p. 67). One of the biggest challenges facing us in Australian education today is the white-washed historical and contemporary nature of educational systems and sites. This extends to the persistence of white settler colonial narratives which control and sustain an often-time deficit discourse in relation to what can and cannot be said or done in relation to working effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and teaching Indigenous Australian Studies (Galman, Pica-Smith & Cynthia Rosenberger 2010; Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist 2003; Moreton-Robinson 2004b).

My work on the canvases began with a request from a local primary school for me to assist them with the implementation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cross-curricular perspective in the history curriculum for Grade 4 and Grade 5. Working in consultation with the Principal, the classroom teachers, the Indigenous elder of the school, and Aboriginal parents at the school, the approach was negotiated as was the content included. Using the state education framework for embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives
in schools (Education Queensland 2011) and the ‘My Land My Tracks’ curriculum framework developed by Dyrribral Aboriginal elder Ernie Grant (Grant 1998), our unit of works were mapped to enact the kind of reconciliation pedagogy that the Melbourne Declaration and the Australian national curriculum call for (see Figures 5 and 6).
The units of work were grounded in Indigenous pedagogical processes and transformative educational practice, which included teaching and learning techniques such as yarning circles and P.E.A.R.L pedagogy (see Mackinlay & Barney 2012). However, at the heart of this dialogue were the canvases and the potential for art in/of/as/through education, as Maxine Greene would have it, to work for social change by “[opening up] the situations that require attention [and that] help disrupt the walls that obscure the spaces, the spheres of freedom to which educators might some day attend” (1988, p. 133). The hope inherent in the arts based approach we adopted was to link a justice-focussed history curriculum with a ‘justice-focussed’ art curriculum (Quinn 2006, p. 295). We hoped to bring collective social awareness and analysis together with collective action-in-art and art-in-action. We aimed to open a space where all of these things could be performed with attention to the possibilities they hold that the world might and could be ‘other-wise’ (Mackinlay 2014).

**SCENE 2: THE CHILDREN TALK**

*Then Vincent Lingiarri boarded an aeroplane  
Landed in Sydney, big city of lights  
And daily he went round softly speaking his story  
To all kinds of men from all walks of life  
From little things, big things grow  
From little things, big things grow*  

*(Carmody & Kelly 1993)*

The scene I want to take you to now in this story is the moment right before the canvases are unveiled to the students’ friends and family. The dialogue presented here is drawn from interviews with the children in each class across each year level immediately after the unit of work and the canvases were completed. Each child is given a pseudonym. The children are talking amongst
themselves before the bell rings to herald the entire school to parade. They are nervous and they have things they want to share with one another about the canvas as artwork, the canvas as representative of their learning in the context of Indigenous Australian Studies. They are talking to one another about what exactly it is they now know about social justice and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and their conversation goes something like this.

Isaac: Hey Peter, what do you reckon they’re going to say when we lift up the sheet and show them the canvasses?

Peter: I think they’ll say they’re good pieces of art.

James: Yeah, the canvasses look[s] good. I like how we’ve got different groups doing different things in different corners of the canvas. It’s all come together.

Annie: It shows people what we’ve been doing.

Isaac: It represents everyone too – by the signatures all on our tree, and by all of the different pictures of all the different things, and it all comes together in the same picture.

Victoria: We all made up and voted on the designs, then we made it. Everyone put their mind to it and communicated.

Matthew: It includes everybody and everyone’s ideas.

Tania: We all participated and we all made this look beautiful.

Zara: I liked painting and seeing everybody getting in and doing it all together.

Isaac: I loved making and cutting out the stencils for all the trees and leaves.

Sally: Me too, I enjoyed doing the tree, doing the leaves and the bark, and I like the collaging of it.
Victoria: I like the mountain, painting the grass and doing the waterfall.

Emma: [The canvas] just shows a lot about what we’ve learned and how we’ve represented it.

Peter: We can actually show what we learned about and what picture we want it to be.

Sally: It’s a fun way to show what we’ve done.

Zara: I loved seeing the canvas develop.

James: [I like how we’ve got] nice colours and I think we’ve done a really good job with the grass and the sky and the love heart in the middle.

Victoria: There’s lots of texture and all different details.

Matthew: It’s pretty much like a puzzle.

Tania: It’s really beautiful and it’s very detailed, especially in the clock, how there’s, I think it’s the butterfly. And down here where the red and yellow sort of squiggly circles are, I think that’s really interesting. [We’ve] put in a lot of effort into it and I’m really proud of our class...everyone has done an amazing job.

James: The canvas looks at us and we look at it, and remember the country we live on and learnt about.

Zara: It’s a picture and [little kids] can look at it and just say to themselves, like that’s what the story must be about.

Matthew: I really like it because it includes all the events and the road, which is like the road of life, and the texture and paint makes it look kind of rocky, it’s the road of life is rocky.

Peter: It’s the journey we’ve gone through, its all about the things and stories we’ve been learning along the way.
Isaac: I wonder if they are going to be able to pick out the important stories – Indigenous stories and our histories too - that we learnt about on our canvasses.

Emma: It’s telling us the stories about the freedom rides and Charles Perkins and the Wave Hill walk off, and Vincent Lingiari, and Mabo and his land, and the Yirrkala bark petition to get land rights back.

Tania: I think [they’re] amazing stories and the history was quite sad and scary. I can share them with my family.

Victoria: There are lots of stories - stories from Indigenous people here in south east Queensland – Kurilpa the Water Rat Yuggera Dreaming who sits on the Brisbane River; stories about the Bunya nut Dreaming and festivals; stories from Liz’s family’s country at Burrulula; the chicken hawk and the crow, turtle hunting.

James: What’s the most important thing you’ve learned do you reckon? [Like] I’m Aboriginal and Torres Strait, but I still learned things about these fellas that I didn't know before – like about Eddie Mabo’s life. Everyone’s learned something more around rights.

Annie: Yeah what happened back in the old days and how the Aborigines didn't get their way about land rights. [Before doing this] I didn't really care much about Aboriginal people, I was just doing my normal life. [I think differently] now about Indigenous people not getting their way with land rights.

Tania: It made me feel upset when I found out they couldn't do the same things as white people.

Peter: I've learned that you can be an Aborigine if you have white skin and all that stuff.

James: [A big message] for me is to look after Aboriginal people’s land, don't ruin it, keep it looking pretty.

Zara: Mmm, me too. I learnt about how Indigenous people take care of the land and how important land is to them, and how they are very important to the land.
Victoria: [How important it is] to pay respect to mother-nature and say thanks to mother-nature.

Sally: I think Aboriginal people make an influence in Australia, and that they have stuff to teach us about being on this country – they teach us how to survive and if they don't teach us, things will die off soon.

Emma: Well, I didn’t really know about them either. I didn’t really feel as much for them because I thought they were all treated the same back then, now I know they weren’t allowed to do as much stuff as we would like to do – that was pretty mean to people.

Matthew: Yeah, they were very mistreated.

Isaac: I’ve got a much stronger feeling for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people because I’ll always remember that Aboriginal peoples are the first peoples on this land, that we took their land, and that they always have it. It wasn’t fair that we took their land away when they were the first ones.

Victoria: Their lives have really changed since the English came to Australia. White fellas walked on their land and they didn’t like it because they’ve been here since the dawn of time. All of a sudden these white fellas come and attack them.

Matthew: I kind of thought the same; I thought why would we do this to such good people? They were here first and then when I thought of all of the reasons that happened I thought we were even meaner than I did before.

Sally: Yeah, Indigenous people have a right to be here and we don’t really. It’s not really our land. The first fleet shouldn’t have treated Indigenous people like that. This has shown me how cruel the first white people were...But it’s hard, really hard. There’s definitely still racism about.

Matthew: [When I get older] I might be like a teacher and go around and tell other people [all about this].
SCENE 3: CHATTING WITH MAXINE AND MORWENNA

Then Vincent Lingiarri returned in an aeroplane
Back to his country once more to sit down
And he told his people let the stars keep on turning
We have friends in the south, in the cities and towns
From little things big things grow
From little things big things grow

(Carmody & Kelly 1993)

I step away quietly, hoping the children haven’t noticed me, hovering at the door and eavesdropping on their conversation – trespassing onto the minds of others, as Kirsten Hastrup (1995) would call any research of this kind. What am I to make of their revelations? What do their admissions tell us about the capacity of arts based praxis to work for social justice in primary curricula and classrooms? How does the concept of wide awakeness link with social justice in real terms – in ways which enact social justice as a verb? My friends Maxine Greene and Morwenna Griffiths are here today for the canvas unveiling and I am desperate to share my theoretical and epistemological thinking with them about the arts in education as social justice work. I find the two of them with a cup of coffee in hand in the staff room as they wait for the parade proceedings to begin.

MAXINE

“Morwenna, it’s really quite simple”, Maxine explains. “Somehow, if we are to remake the democratic culture and if we are to awaken an ethical consciousness, we have to discover how to arouse passion again, the passion that accompanies the belief that things can be otherwise, that everything has not been done” (Greene 1977, p. 72).
“I agree with you Maxine”, Morwenna nods her head. “But, what does this mean as action, I mean real action in a social justice sense”.

What is a social justice ‘sense’? Immediately the work of Nancy Fraser (2009) on the three elements of social justice as recognition, redistribution and representation come to mind. Fraser speaks of cultural, economic and political injustice whereby each is dependent and interlinked with the other. If collaborative art work makes recognition of Indigenous ways of experiencing and knowing about the past in the present, is this what Fraser means by cultural justice? If the canvases make space for a different framing of Indigenous Australian peoples to take place that works against political injustice, is that enough for the kind of representative justice Fraser refers to? And what of economic injustice? How can the canvases as collective action work towards redistribution? And what would Iris Marion Young (have to say in cultural terms about justice? Her work on justice addresses issues of cultural imperialism as a major oppressive force and under the guise of colonialism; and, this is definitely the grounding from which these units of work began. However, my understanding of both Fraser and Young is green, and for now none of these ways of conceiving of social justice seem necessarily complete. While neither would claim that theories of justice are universal and comprehensive, I wonder how Fraser and Young might take into account the complex ways in which notions of justice played out as the collaborative art pieces came to life. I wonder whose theories of justice are at work in this particular here and now of Indigenous Australian studies and a curriculum mandate grounded in arts based and reconciliation pedagogy. Would Fraser or Young want to stand alongside the children and paint their theory of social justice on the canvases with them?
LIZ

“And that’s where I come unstuck”, I add as I sit down. “What social justice means for me, what it means to the children, and what it means for Indigenous people – are they the same thing?”

MAXINE

“But maybe that’s the problem Liz”, offers Maxine, “you are assuming that they might mean the same thing, and yet, in reality that’s impossible – you occupy different positionings in that discourse because of your identities as colonizer and colonized. No matter how many times you use the word social justice, that fact remains”.

LIZ

I can’t help but agree with her. “In classrooms and curricula, we frequently use words like “reconciliation”, “hope”, “action” and “social justice” as panaceas to the on-going impact of colonialism on the daily lives of Indigenous peoples and our knowing collusion in it. We feel comfortable using these words as non-Indigenous people working in Indigenous Australian Studies and education because they provide us with a place of belonging – a place where the performance of our identities as White settler colonials has value, worth, authority and power. They provide us with “immunity”, as Youngblood Henderson (2000, p. 32) contends, from recognising and responding to ourselves as part of the problem. At the end of the day, huge questions remain about who can actually make claims for justice (pers. comm., M. Mills, 2013). Can we as non-Indigenous educators claim that our work is socially just when we participate in and are beneficiaries of the political framings that create the injustice for Indigenous peoples in the first place?”
MORWENNA

“Knowing what to do about social justice in education depends on ways of dealing with this continuing complexity, indeed [this] tension”, Morwenna offers (Griffiths 2003, p. 19).

MAXINE

“They have to be named, understood, in some way acted upon” (Greene 1977, p. 68)”, Maxine suggests.

LIZ

“And this is where we have thought of this work as transformative education, that is, (O’Sullivan, Morrell & O’Connor, 2002, p. xvii)”, I pause for a moment before continuing. “Teaching and learning which involves: a deep structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings and actions; a shift of consciousness that alters our way of being in the world; understanding ourselves, our self-locations, and our relationships with others in the world; understanding relations of power in interlocking structures of race, class and gender; and, envisioning alternative approaches and possibilities for social justice”.

MORWENNA

“Yes”, Morwenna agrees, “and this is what I mean about social justice as a verb. ‘Start where you (you all, we all) are…and keep on, because it matters’ ” (2014, p. 233).

MAXINE

“Do you want to hear my take on it all Liz?” asks Maxine. “The children have heard the stories, witnessed history in the here and now, and have felt something real in relation to them—in essence, they have become wide awake. I think the arts ‘provide new perspectives on the lived world’ (Greene 1995, p. 4), new possibilities for new ways of thinking about social justice—it takes imagination to break with ordinary classifications…
It takes imagination on the part of young people to perceive openings through which they can move” (Greene 1995, p. 14); ‘imagination is what makes empathy possible’ (Greene 1995, p. 3); ‘imagination may be our primary means of forming an understanding of what goes on under the heading of ‘reality’; imagination may be responsible for the very textures of our experience’ (Greene 1995, p. 139).

MORWENNA

“Is this not what you think has happened Liz?” Morwenna asks.

CONCLUSION

That was the story of Vincent Lingiarri
But this is the story of something much more
How power and privilege cannot move a people
Who know where they stand and stand in the law
From little things, big things grow
From little things, big things grow

(Carmody & Kelly 1993)

When I look at the four canvasses, I see four stunning pieces of artwork. They are beautiful to me, however, in ways which go beyond an aesthetic appeal. What is fundamentally critical to the canvasses is that each and every child’s learning and knowing is embedded in the visual imagery you see. If you ask any of the children in any of the Grade 4 and Grade 5 classes about the learning represented on the canvas, each and every child can tell you what it means for them in terms of their understanding about Indigenous Australian peoples, cultures and knowledges. If the children were unable to articulate these understandings, the artworks would mean nothing, despite how pretty they might look as works of art. The canvases show that arts based research methods, processes and pedagogies matter in the context of social justice. The children’s narratives about the
canvases tell us that social justice can indeed become something more than a metaphor.

We completed units of work which enact the requirements of the curriculum to include Indigenous Australian perspectives, and yet, the questions that remain with me are, is what we have done in this pedagogical space enough to work towards social justice? Is it enough that words and names like Kurilpa, Yuggera, Yanyuwa, Charles Perkins and Eddie Mabo, or events like the Wave Hill walk off or the Yirrkala bark petition are now part of their vocabulary? We can tick the box in relation to the requirements of the visual arts curriculum for these year levels but what about the enactment of reconciliation pedagogy which underpins the national push for teaching Indigenous Australian Studies? Is this enough to transform children’s hearts and minds so that they might move forward and not settle for anything less than a socially just and equitable Australia for Indigenous Australians? Is this what social justice means in the context of primary school education, and if not, what should it be – does it work hard enough for the recognition, rights and relationships which are yet to come with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples?

The story I have shared today is incomplete for I do not have an answer to any of the questions I have posed - and yet that is, perhaps, as it should be – we as “teachers, like [our] students, have to learn to love the questions, as [we] come to realize that there can be no final agreements or answers, no final commensurability” (Greene 1988, p. 134). Maxine Greene’s voice becomes words in my mouth for what I am certain of is that, “It is simply not enough for us to reproduce the way things are”, it is time to do things differently in Indigenous Australian Studies if we are serious about creating a different kind of justice for Indigenous Australian peoples. If we agree that the arts have the potential to put in place a process of wide awakeness to how things are, then it is time to walk down that unknown road of possibility and the time to begin imagining is now.
I grew up as an educator, ethnomusicologist, researcher when I began to talk to, work with, and walk with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and I acknowledge the teachings and learnings of my Yanyuwa family, for without them, I would not be in a position to work with young children in the context of Indigenous Australian Studies nor write this chapter. I would also like to acknowledge the young children who worked with me on the collaborative canvases and who generously shared their thinking with me about their art-as-social justice work – in my mind each and every one is an intellectual and artistic giant whose ways of imagining and being in this world continue to inspire me. Thanks to the Principal and the four classroom teachers where this research was located, who so eagerly embraced the arts in this teaching and learning space as appropriate for the history curriculum and the agendas they hold for social justice in education. A huge thank you to Janine for working with me on this project as research manager, colleague, co-canvas coordinator, creative advisor and friend.
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