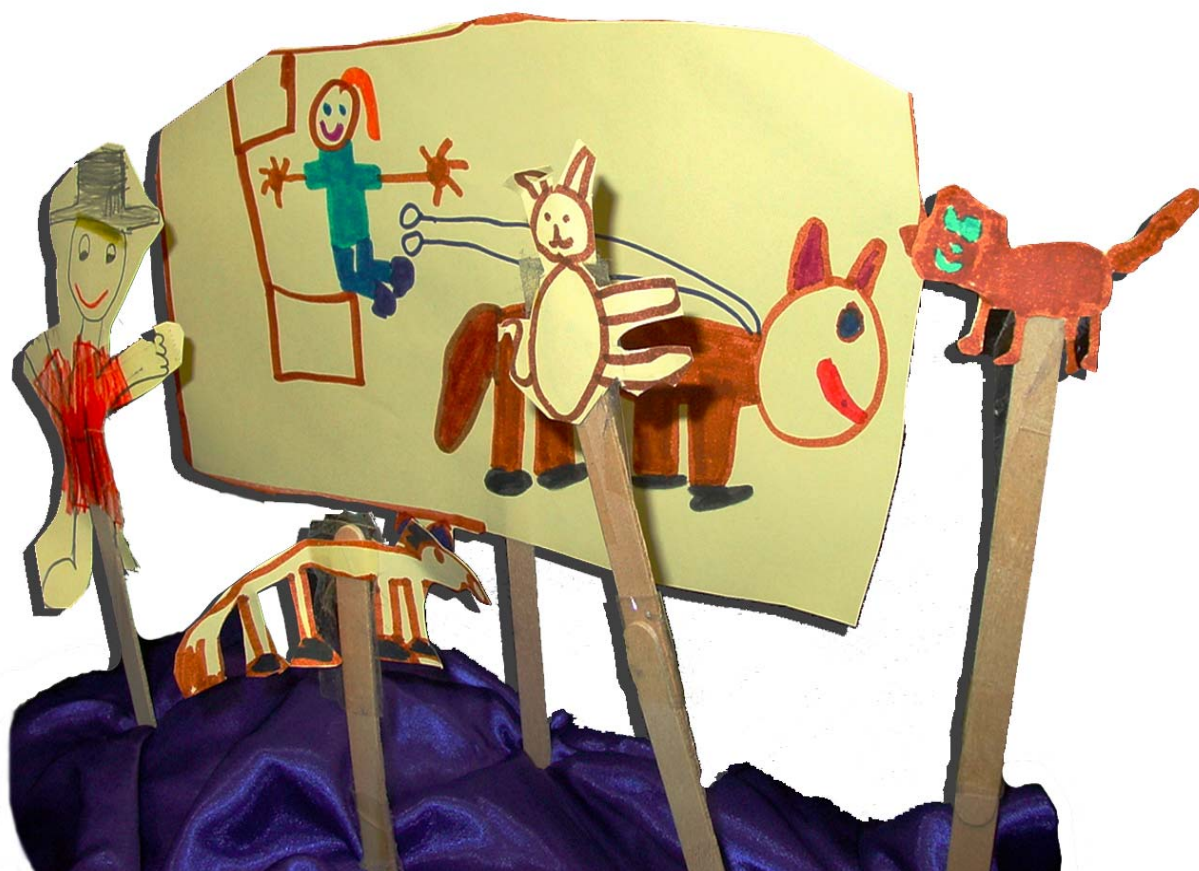


Children's responses to live performance: A longitudinal study (2003 – 2005)



Final Report – Executive Summary



Government of South Australia
Department of Education and
Children's Services





Executive Summary

Children's Voices FINAL REPORT

Children's responses to live performance: A longitudinal study

Children's Voices was a longitudinal research project to explore and document children's perceptions of live arts performance and the impact on children, their teachers and school communities. The research conducted in South Australia with 140, five to twelve year olds in four schools involved collaboration between the South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS), Windmill Performing Arts and de Lissa Institute for Early Childhood and Family Studies, University of South Australia (UniSA). The children attended two to three arts performances per year at the Festival Theatre, Adelaide. The research was conducted over a period of three years (2003 - 2005).

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Recommendations from recent reports have provided the impetus for teachers to revitalise and rethink the role of arts education in curriculum and culture in Australia. Learning in the arts not only impacts on "how children learn to think, but also how they feel and behave...so the arts can play a vital role in learning how to learn, an essential ability for fostering achievement and growth throughout [our] lives" (Fiske, 1999).

Children's Voices documented what children said and did, thereby acknowledging that children think through the arts (Schiller, 2000) using play and their senses as a basis for interpretation (Kolbe, 2000; Edwards, 2006), that they used multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983), engaged in multiple literacies from different art forms (Livermore, 1998) and multimodal representations (Makin & Jones Diaz, 2002; Kress, 2000). This research project empowered children to express ideas in different ways (Genishi, 1982; Wright, 2003), enabled them to 'talk about images' (Callow, 1999:4) and recognised children as active producers of culture through their participation and re-creation of activities in new contexts (Corsaro, 2000; Thyssen, 2003) which were meaningful to them (Punch, 2002; Wright, 2003).

Researchers, too, were recognising that children were "a group apart... with their own cultural lenses and so, deserving attention in their own right" (Graue & Walsh 1998, in Barrett & Smigiel, 2003: 3). Therefore, the *Children's Voices* project was important for theory building because it addressed the developing area of the sociology of childhood (Brown, 2003; James, Jenks & Prout, 1998) and was one of the very few studies to examine the impact of live arts performances from the perspective of children over a three year period. *Children's Voices* enabled children to directly express thoughts, feelings and their ideas about the arts (Wright, 2003; Weddell, 2003). *Children's Voices* was an opportunity for South Australia to show leadership in the arts. Most importantly, *Children's Voices* gave children's perceptions and ideas credibility and accorded them respect as research respondents (Schiller, 2005).

Two research questions provide the framework for the study:

- ***What was the impact of attending live arts performances on school-aged children in public schools in South Australia?***
- ***What was the impact on schools and their communities?***

Methodology for this project included tracking children's various responses to performance using individual and focus group interviews, case studies, artefacts and teachers' journals. Teacher interviews assessed the impact of performance on their classroom practice, professional and personal development. Interviews with parents and school leaders clarified the impact of live arts on school communities in each of the areas. Group feedback at regular research team meetings with teachers and principals were also sources of information as was informal feedback from parents and parent groups at the schools. Where possible, directors and actors also gave informal feedback on the impact of the research on production and performance.

The aim of participatory techniques is for adult researchers to 'listen to children's voices' (Punch, 2002:334) and for children to use images, words, pictures and actions to communicate. Such techniques require a researcher's meticulous attention to ethical and methodological issues to overcome bias or over-reliance on one method, to triangulate and cross check data and allow the diversity and the plurality of children's experiences and skills to emerge (Morrow, 2003; Mouritsen, 2002; Flewitt, 2005).

The operation of the three year project was facilitated by the *Children's Voices* Management Team. Small amounts of research funding were contributed by each of DECS, UniSA and Windmill Performing Arts. In-kind support was also provided by DECS, UniSA, Windmill Performing Arts and Adelaide Metro.

RESEARCH SAMPLE

The research participants were 140 children Reception to Year 5 classes in four metropolitan public schools in South Australia. A selection panel chose participant schools on the basis of the school's geographic location, composition, DECS Index of Disadvantage and applicability to the criteria as specified in an advertisement requesting participation of volunteer schools. Within these schools, students were randomly selected with approximately equal numbers of boys and girls participating in the research.

COLLECTION OF DATA

As this research involved a relatively new area of inquiry which required an understanding of how children (5-12 years) perceived, understood and described live arts performances and how they owned, valued, interpreted, recreated, improvised and produced their own arts activities, qualitative methods (Berg, 1995; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) were selected to encapsulate the richness of the data based on children's accounts and experiences. Children were interviewed individually and in groups pre and post performance.

Pre-Performance questions:

1. *What do you think the arts are?*
2. *What performances have you been to?*
3. *How do you think you will feel at a performance?*
4. *What might be in a performance?*
5. *Who makes a performance happen?*
6. *Why do people go to a performance?*

Post Performance questions:

1. *How did the performance make you feel?*
2. *What did you learn from the performance?*
3. *How could you use what you have learned?*
4. *How would you like to be involved in a performance?*



Performances attended: 2003 – 2005

- 2003** *BRUNDIBAR*: A children's opera originally sung by the children in Terezin during World War II.
ROBINSON CRUSOE: Daniel Defoe's classic novel told through dance and music.
THE SNOW QUEEN: A multimedia production based on Hans Christian Andersen's classic story with real-time animation and virtual sets controlled in real-time.
- 2004** *Riverland* - about an indigenous family's sense of space and the land, set in the S.A. Riverland.
A SAFER PLACE -the story of refugee children who have recently arrived from Afghanistan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iraq and Sudan.
FLUFF presents a day in the life of a strange but caring woman and her helpers who run a home for lost toys. It is told through sound, dance and movement – for children aged 3- 8 years.
AFTERNOON OF THE ELVES –about a girl who is caught between wanting to be part of the 'in crowd' and being true to her friend, Sara-Kate (based on an award winning novel by Janet Taylor Lisle).
- 2005** *MIDNITE*: A chamber opera based on the Australian children's novel *Midnite*, by Randolph Stow. The story of an inept bushranger and his unconventional gang, a cat, a horse, a cow and a cockatoo.
WILFRID GORDON McDONALD PARTRIDGE: Based on a book by Mem Fox and Julie Vivas, the story is brought to life using a combination of giant puppets, acrobats and illusion.

SUMMARY

Over the three years, the most noticeable impact was the children's marked gain in literacy. Children's vocabulary about performance (in particular) also expanded over the three years. They wrote about 'voice tone' (*Midnite*), 'frightedness' (*A Safer Place*), being amused and shocked (*Riverland*) so words were explored, learned, invented and used in context, after enjoying several performances and various performance styles. Children were also encouraged at home and at school to read critiques of performances in newspapers, to write their own stories, plays, poems, letters, scripts, diaries and posters. Thus, oral and written expressive language improved over the three years.

Children were learning about performance literacy in particular. They knew the correct terms for people's roles and responsibilities in live arts performances. They were learning to think critically about what they were seeing, and to critique and express their ideas clearly, articulately and honestly. That is, children were becoming critically aware, and applying skills learned in the *Children's Voices* project to other performances and events, and across related learning areas (e.g. society and environment, science and technology).

Equally, performances, because of the social justice issues tackled, gave all children in the *Children's Voices* project understanding and 'a greater appreciation of the background and difficulties faced by other students who came from another country and could not speak English on arrival', remarked one school principal, and 'children are showing more empathy and kindness as a results of their experiences'. Another principal commented that even the title of the project - *Children's Voices* - had impacted on the whole school culture 'so that now we consider we are listening to children's voice in every area of the school'.

Perhaps most important of all, children's response to live arts performance in this project directly affected their learning and their lives. The excellent quality of performances the children saw in the *Children's Voices* project sparked their imagination, inspired them in many different ways and opened their minds to learning from the arts outside of theatre experience. Attending performances had provided the initiative and confidence for children to create their own work. "While all children experienced the same classroom curricula and saw the same performance, it was the individual learning that each child was able to present, illustrate and communicate that highlighted the deep personal involvement that a child experienced through exposure to live arts performances". They had become thinkers, decision makers and meaning makers in the arts.

General comments about this three year, collaborative research project are:

- really, the only 'downside' of the whole project was that the three year research project did not attract any external research funding and was reliant on the goodwill and commitment of the partners in the project
- *Children's Voices* was a longitudinal study and, as reported in Australia Council's *Education and the Arts Research Overview* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005), quantitative studies are needed to show empirically that the arts and performance have a great deal to offer children and education
- what *Children's Voices* has demonstrated is that where live arts performances of a high calibre are supported by pre-performance preparation programs and research, there is learning for professional artists, children, families, teachers, companies and policy makers.

Ultimately then, such projects have the potential to make South Australia a more creative, innovative state through investment in children, education and the arts, and in strengthening connections between educational institutions, academia, industry and communities.



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