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# Doing Research-Creation in School: Keeping an Eye on the Ball

## Kate Pahl and Steve Pool

#### Abstract

This article explores the potential of the idea of 'research-creation' when working with children making films in the context of a project that explored children's experience of school. The proposition of the article is that rather than see children's work as something to be discussed or extracted from, if it is seen as 'the work' it is differently situated. In the article, an artist and an ethnographer explore the potential of artistic methodologies in working collaboratively with children. The article describes this process and engages with an interdisciplinary lens to explore the nature of this kind of work. The results of the art-making activities included a series of short films made by children on their experience of feeling odd in school. Within these films, ideas surfaced such as ghosts or day-dreaming. In the conclusion the implications for artistic research with children are explored.

#### **Keywords**

Artistic research, research with children, ethnography, art practice, research-creation

'Art celebrates with a peculiar intensity the moments in which the past re-enforces the present and in which the future is a quickening of what now is' (Dewey 1934/ 2005, 17).

### Introduction

This article suggests that research outcomes cannot be separated from doing research. The phrase 'we keep an eye on the ball' describes the practice of doing—thinking—making—research with children in schools (see Figure 1). To 'keep an eye on the ball' at all times is to be aware of how things are unfolding, to not be distracted and to keep focus. We draw on Dewey (1934/2005) in exploring the experiential and

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#### Figure 1

Still image from 'Smashing' film

aesthetic processes within educational research. We thereby reconsider how and where meaning is made and shared (Barone & Eisner 2012). We explore how embodied experiences of making and doing are enfolded within our thinking and become a process of doing research–creation (Cambre *et al.* 2020). This work affirms that the stuff that matters in research with young people is an entangled assemblage of rhythms, flows and movements that can come to light in the making of something new together connecting to the flow of research with the charged immediacy of everyday life, forcing further questions and further movement.

This writing emerges from a three-year project, funded by the AHRC entitled 'Odd: Feeling Different in the World of Education'<sup>1</sup> situated in a primary school in central Manchester, UK. Integrated inside the school is a unit for deaf children. The school's catchment is urban, multilingual and diverse. The project drew together artists, educational researchers and school staff to consider what it felt like to not fit in and how schools could work to accommodate difference in the world of education. Our aim was to rethink the language of difference and make possible the children's own perceptions of school and its oddness. The school wanted to work with thoughts and ideas about feeling odd and saw artistic interventions as a way of working differently.

We are an artist and an ethnographer by training, but in this article our voices and experiences come together. Working with children between 8 and 11 years old over three years (year 4, 5 and 6), we developed a methodology of working across two year-groups, with small groups, to make films with children-as-researchers. The children were tasked with finding out, using film, ideas of what it was to feel odd in school. We then spent time with the children in groups, analysing the films. Our intention was also to involve the children in academic life, inviting them to visit the university and attend a conference, as part of the experience of the project. As we worked with the young people, we recognised that for them to be co-researchers we needed to change what we considered as data. In the concept of research-creation (which we will expand on later) we found approaches that were helpful in this shift.

## The research project

The aim of the project was to work with young people to explore 'Oddness in school'. We did this in part through making films with young people for a large-

scale video projection event onto the outside of the school building. The project took place between 2018 and 2020 over two consecutive year-groups. We spent two week-long periods over two years, involving two full classes of pupils working within autonomous small groups with children from years 4–5 (aged 8–10). The school had asked us to work across a full year-group as it allowed them to fit the research into the school day and their longer-term planning. This approach gave all the children in the year-group the same opportunity to participate. The young people brought with them their previous skills and knowledge of video production. This included experience from formal school projects and self-initiated out-of-school projects including producing small videos for social media platforms. We made short films and edited them for a projection event at the end of the week. In this way, the works became part of a bigger event. While we co-planned a programme of work with teachers, our aim was to plan and adapt to the way the project evolved.

We returned to school to develop a second set of films. We made sure that the children were in charge of the direction and editing. We supported the children, showing and explaining what technology they could access such as green screen technology and the creative potential of some Apps. Each group used I-movie on an Ipad which allowed for simple editing and a rearrangement of clips. It was unnecessary to use any school media equipment. This approach to technology allowed the young people to follow the threads of their ideas with little support from adults. Many children are more familiar with the technological interface than adults. This shifts the idea of 'expertise' in relation to film-making with young people.

We saw 'oddness' not as connected to people, but as a flow of ideas, and wanted to open out the concept to the children. Trying to balance the flow of ideas with the technical possibilities and available equipment was always difficult, yet also useful, as it placed an emphasis of process over finished outcomes and we were swept along within the ideas. What was speculated in the planning unfolded differently within what was made and everything felt like a rush. Most of the films produced did not follow linear narratives. They contained the problems that came about in their making – the disagreements, the impossibility to realise some ideas, the desire to go outside into the sun and play football, the problems of negotiation within group work. They all presented an evolution of ideas; although most did not feel finished, they were in many ways complete. They did not really have a next stage, though they did perhaps have a sequel.

We then had to consider how collectively to explore the films as creative outcomes that could stand alone as research. Three months later, in an effort to explore what was unfolding within film-making process and co-planning with young people about what could come next, we returned to the school. The children were by that time in year 6 and were between 10 and 11 years old. Over a period of about three months, we talked about the experience of making the Odd films with the young people in small groups, meeting weekly for an hour at a time in class time. We also re-watched the films with the children. As we re-watched the films, they presented us collectively with something new to think through. We needed to find a language of description for thinking-feeling in the moment as we watched the films with the children, who had themselves made the films. We asked what would emerge if we considered the project as 'research-creation' with young people; what would this reorientation afford. Research-creation became a way to think and write about the complex and messy nature of what kinds of research can emerge through the in-act of doing research-creation together.

## **Research-creation**

Originating in Canada and North America in the early 2000s, the term 'researchcreation' is applied to research which foregrounds artistic practice and is used by funding bodies and research institutes to help to validate and provide funding streams for artistic-orientated enquiry within research establishments (Cambre *et al.* 2020). Research-creation as a category of inquiry is contested. The term has generated much debate, as it is not a clear methodological approach or a bounded set of disciplinary practices. In practice, there is debate over whether it is a term that should be capitalised or hyphenated or treated as a noun or a verb. Over the past decade research-creation has grown in popularity as one way to talk through what arts practice or the 'work' of art can activate within research.

The word 'research' has a tendency to create a separation between the subject/object of study, what is to be found out and the research methods used. For this reason, some writers hyphenate the term, so it becomes: 'research-creation' in order to emphasise the singular nature of the concept. As an approach, researchcreation affords an unfolding and an opening-up to what can be and what is morethan. It is sensitive to the way many artists imagine the process of making and creating. This is to orientate forward to think of what is not-yet or what is always about to be. Research-creation opens a potential to work with theory, thoughts, things and texts embedded within the *doing* of the project. It is the *in-act* of research creation that affords the possibility for enquiry and art to hold together within the space of enquiry/research/doing (Manning & Massumi 2014).

Research-creation as an approach attends to the possibility of what is to come, rather than explaining what is already of concern. We have found over ten years of work researching with young people that new thoughts and ideas would always emerge within the *time of the work*. This focused on what was about to happen rather than exploring what had or was happening. The frameworks we were using that were drawn from social science were sometimes inadequate to capture this, and we looked for ways of thinking that challenged our sedimented ideas of method specifically in relation to time and how we experienced it within research.

There are strong correlations between research-creation and the UK field of 'Practice-as-Research' (Nelson 2013) where research is understood as in-practice, emergent and process-led. Research-creation takes into account the dispersed nature of authorship. It is possible to work propositionally, within the field of 'research-creation', particularly when working with children (Shannon & Truman 2020). Rotas & Springgay (2014) explored the methodological implications of research-creation at its intersection with artistic practice to unsettle disciplinary boundaries. Proponents of research-creation include the work of Manning & Massumi (2014) and Loveless (2019) suggesting the concept of 'research-creation' as capturing this idea of research-in-practice. Research-creation is not strictly speaking a method; rather, it presents collaborative researchers with speculative propositions. Research-creation does not provide a template or clear instructions. It enabled the practice of doing research together with children and young people, keeping a focus on what was to come, the incomplete and the ongoing.

Research-creation emphasises the idea of *in-process*, to describe a shared practice that enables an orientation towards flow and movement and does not signal a quest for answers to pre-decided questions. Research-creation can help focus on collaborative creative *work* with children as always within process and flow. Dewey (1934/2005,108) suggested that 'the process of living is continuous' and that process and product are one thing, always in the process of becoming other. This supports our central proposition – that the 'work' is both in this article, and in the process of doing the research. We borrow the term 'work' from art and also from the everyday as both doing something useful and of purpose, and as artwork or work of art; *work* here is both verb and noun simultaneously. The idea of the 'work' enabled us to unsettle and shift the children's ideas in a way that could only be held within the form of the film as a *work*.

The philosophy of Dewey and his ideas of art-as-process, outlined within *Art as Experience* (1934/2005) can be brought into the emerging field of researchcreation to think about creative research with young people differently. In following this line of thought, we do not aim to value process over product or suggest that one precedes the other, rather we hope to question the need for two categories and replace them with the concept of the 'work'. This way of working is well established within practice-based research. We do not aim to model or mimic fineart practice in school. We intended to conduct meaningful research with young people to generate new knowledge. Within social research it is important to resist the urge to codify, de-construct and dissect young people's work, to fix it or present it as finished product. We aimed to value the flow of ideas, recognising that research of this kind is never complete or fixed within an artwork or a piece of writing.

There is a distinction between art-making as research-creation with young people, in which process is folded into product (following Dewey) and creative methods as research tools. This distinction between artistic approaches to research (including 'practice-as-research') and 'creative methods' is exemplified by the work of Kara (2020). Kara's work sees creative methods as sitting with a social science paradigm of research (Pool 2018). Creative approaches such as photovoice (where children choose photographs or take photographs to illustrate lived experience) are valuable when working with young people to elicit stories. Creating art objects that coalesce thoughts and dialogue as the result of a research process is valuable in itself (O'Neill & Roberts 2019). The tradition of visual methods is useful when working collaboratively with young people, particularly those that recognise the situated nature of visual methodologies (Pink 2001). This involves having an awareness of the possible different potentials of traditions and ways of thinking. There is a danger in conflating approaches that may in many ways appear very similar yet become significant for very different reasons (Pool 2018).

Methods to explore children's feelings within research can involve enquiry that pays attention to and emerges from their lived experience and how it flows in and out of school. Children's experiences of the world are increasingly understood to be embodied, felt and affective (Hackett *et al.* 2018). Hohti (2016) asked children to document and record their experiences of school using an ethnographic method. Drawing on children's written notes, the emerging archive emphasised the 'small stories' of school (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008) and the physicality of children's experiences of running and being in the classroom. These methods pay attention to children's worlds from where they are, and point research towards the possibilities of what it is to know. Working 'with' resists the urge to capture knowledge. It co-produces unfamiliar outputs and in so doing challenges, on many levels, the familiar within educational research. Research with children of this kind requires a reframing of what is understood as an outcome or contribution to the felt quality of knowledge (Hohti 2016).

We previously explored this potential in another project by asking a small group of children to co-research with us using a number of methods, including still photographs, flip cameras, notebooks and audio recorders. The children were asked to explore what the impact of a group of artists was on a school and when they felt creative (Pahl & Pool 2011). Their answer was that play time and choice time, and 'messing-about' were key moments for the children. We framed the article about the project with the children's own discussions of their *work*. Our collective work involved being 'ourselves' in this discussion, not leading, but sharing. We talked about grandparents and pet dogs and we made stories together. We realise that children's research needs to be situated in the ebb-and-flow of children's lives, a point echoed by Gallacher & Gallagher (2008).

## **Research-creation in school**

Research-creation affords a potential to think with the work of the project. We thought within the films. This enabled us to take a step beyond representation, and to think forward. This enabled us to think more-than what the films seem to afford to research, to look to their excess. We do not suggest they meant more than they seemed to or contained hidden texts or links to unexpressed emotions or thoughts. Our aim through this writing is to present them *in their own right* as small works of creative research that shine a light on fragments of what Manning & Massumi (2014) call 'thoughts in the act'.

An approach that draws on research-creation as outlined by Manning & Massumi (2014) may offer a potential to doing and valuing research with children differently. Truman & Shannon (2018, 62) have argued that research-creation offers an approach that is 'mov[ing] away from approaches to qualitative research that assume data can be collected, extracted [and] represented, and towards an affective, emergent, relational and more-than representational approach to doingresearch'. Previously our joint working over many projects has involved multiplatform approaches to exploring ideas and thoughts creatively with young people. This involved making films, telling stories, exploring ideas together and going on expeditions and journeys. We are aware of, but try not to fully identify with, established research modalities such as participatory/ social/ pedagogic or socially engaged political arts practice (Kester 2004; Bishop 2012). We try not to impose fixed reference points or specific historical approaches from established and emergent arts and cultural hegemonies on work with young people. Instead, we are trying out ideas within an emergent space of practice. This follows previous research (e.g. Pahl & Pool 2018) where we have drawn on theory from art and philosophy to make sense of emergent practice in community settings. We explore what work can be done when we do not model creative research in school as practice-asresearch in the tradition of art within the academy (Nelson 2013) or socially engaged art practice (Kester 2004; Bishop 2012).

We were interested in the 'cracks and hopes and dreams' among the children. But we also have a utopian hope for co-production as a mode of being, a way of finding a space for children and young people to act and articulate in a way that was outside the rule-bound world of school (Bell & Pahl 2018). We wanted to explore what mode of working could open a space for something collective and new to emerge. Barthes' statement on interdisciplinary work is useful here, as the ambition of this work is to collectively create a 'new object' that belongs to no one, and as such no individual discipline:

Interdisciplinary work, so much discussed these days, is not about confronting already constituted disciplines (none of which, in fact, is willing to let itself go). To do something interdisciplinary it's not enough to choose a 'subject' (a theme) and gather around it two or three sciences. Interdisciplinarity consists in creating a new object that belongs to no one. (Barthes 1986, 26)

This shared understanding of creating a process that 'belongs to no one' guided our thoughts and ideas. Our project often took the 'form' of stories, whether small films made by children, exploratory discussions about the films, or our own odd stories that became entangled in the project.

In presenting the outcomes of co-produced research-creation as emergent collaborative *research* outcomes, rather than data to be analysed, coded and represented, a different form of collective knowledge and meaning can unfold. Treating children's cultural productions and expressions as 'data' is not inherently problematic; rather, we propose a different starting-point where the children's cultural productions are part of many research outcomes that speak in different ways. This presents a problem for writing. Writing by its nature needs to represent and in so doing, puts the children's work at a distance forcing an interpretation. This presented us with the problem of analysis and dissemination. Concerned with this problem, we tried not to directly extract from the creative *work* as illustration of children's lives; instead, we paid attention to the forms that emerge. They are provocations for our collective thinking and writing; they are *works* and the work of research in flow and process.

What was produced was often concerned with the small and often disregarded aspects of our lives, the things that we would normally walk past. The 'no-running' rule, the queue for dinner, the trains that flashed past the outdoor spaces of the school every ten minutes – these were the unfamiliar, the odd, that emerged in the process of creating together. It was within these minor details that a new and collective understanding of what it was like to feel odd emerged and it is within this emergence that we felt the potential of something new. The question of what it is to learn (see below) emerged in a conversation with pupils. In an attempt to share how research-creation affords the potential to share thoughts differently, we have drawn on transcripts of conversations that emerged within the project.

## **Fragments**

As a response to the analytic discussions, we wrote some vignettes that illustrated the learning that emerged from the analytic discussions, drawing on the idea of the 'Hundreds' from Berlant & Stewart (2019). We tried to stick to 100 words. These are extracts that we present as fragments of conversations with young people. We included them as a way to share process. All the young people involved were fully aware that these conversations would form part of our research outcomes and were happy to share their thoughts with our readers. We have chosen examples of moments where we were surprised, where children's stories seemed to point to something unexpected, to speak of different values and different experiences. They hold truths that are normally obscured and resonate for us. They are

not findings, or examples; rather, they should be taken as they were intended, as small stories or 'telling tales'. The fragments of writing presented here are research-creation moments of our own, when we were riffing on ideas that emerged from discussing the film-making process with young people. We tried our best to write in a form that captured the trace of a thought and pays attention to the new ideas that have emerged rather than address our adult preconceptions. The writing is a mix of recordings of the transcripts, some from listening, together with readings we were doing at the time, including fiction and poetry.

#### Learning

Steve: 10:53

Did you learn to do anything or learn anything about anything? Girl 10:57

I learned how to do the text part (put on titles in iMovie) you know how we did it, like ages ago I learned how to do that to change text.

Boy 11:05

I learned how to catch a locust off a teacher's back because there's was a locust on Miss McNeil's back and I was filming it and then I captured it and then I let it fly off - it was next to us - I took a few pictures.

When I asked what you had learned I was wondering what you saw as learning. To remove a locust from a teacher's back is a learning that involves skills acquired over time. It requires you to overcome the fear of insects, then to take responsibility for the life of an animal and finally to make a decision to act. The things that are learned are already known they are practised within an unexpected opportunity. Learning can be about developing a skill and responding to a new situation. We can own what we learn, it is ours to keep or lose.

I am interested in what we learn on the edges of what we are supposed to learn. The story of the locusts holds much more meaning than the actual event. The locust swarms and eats the crops – it comes as a plague. The locust on Miss McNeil's back is a grasshopper or a cricket in my mind's eye. It is stuck in the fibres of a green cashmere sweater on a forgotten hot summers' day. It stands in for a type of learning that is difficult to put your finger on. A counter learning 'with' rather than 'about' something.

These themes resonated across the two years of the project. Our focus was on the 'small stories' that were produced in the films (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008). We paid attention to the way a story could hold the collective idea of something different happening. Sometimes this would be a short reference to a sensory moment, for example, when the sun turned orange or the smell of the moors burning above Greater Manchester had soaked into the school. Sometimes in our discussions together a young person would go quiet, sit up straighter and demand an audience. She would remind a group of a time when a bin had rolled across the hall, its movement unexplained, but was noticed by everyone present and everyone listening. These momentary stories stopped us in our habitual tracks and echoed across the project, they became the work. When the films and the stories emerged that seemed more easily directed towards the project's focus on feeling odd at school there was always a potential for things to slip and expand and take on new potentials. In the story below a child relates the acceptance of the oddness of life that resonates with a story of always seeing the same person walking in the street. Research-creation afforded a space where potential connections and ideas unfolded and their relevance would emerge through the act of exploration creating a vibrant edge to a knowing that refused to be fixed.

#### Different to normal

#### Child 4:35

Walking about actually there is a tons of odd things, but then if we hadn't been working with you on the odd project, we wouldn't of recognised them. I used to think everything is normal. Now I did this [project], I thought like now when I walk around everything is odder and it made me feel happier.

Child 4:58

This guy who was sometimes.... I used to see on the street, just walking around all the time, what I thought it's what he did every single day. He doesn't actually do that all the time.

Steve: Everyone has a different idea of what is normal. At [name of] school its normal to speak many languages. It is normal to sign when you sing. It is normal to have tennis balls on the feet of chairs and tables so they do not make lots of scratching noises. For lots of children it is normal to hear the world through a transducer that is implanted into your skull. I sometimes wonder if we pretend to kids the world is much more normal than it actually is. I see the same man every time I go for a walk.

We are committed to working with young people and we tried to collaborate with them in the writing up of this work. Recognising the difficulty of writing a journal article with children, we experimented with alternative forms of writing. Our vignettes reflected on ideas from discussing the films with the children. We played with these ideas to write something new. We regarded the films as works with an internal integrity made to share in class. The original films were more than a way to elicit talk - they were personal and shared explorations of the odd things that happen in school. Our collective work, as unfolding stories-as-research, disrupted our sedimented form of research (Loveless 2019). The works did not unfold as a linear sequence, they were representational of ideas but not straightforward, often relying on reversal and flipping as key tropes. The films-as-stories explored themes such as dreaming, going backwards, ghosts and fake ice-cream that everyone decided was real on a hot day. They recorded thought-in-action and the 'what-if' speculative moments in the experience of the school day. Events such as the smashing of a windowpane became intensified, and everyday actions such as running were enacted in strange ways, as if in dream worlds.

This work can point towards ways of knowing and doing, emotions and feelings that express the entanglement of school with all its parts. This includes the formal and the informal, content and process, friendships and aspirations, laughter and dancing. For us, as adults trying to find out about the life of young people, we acknowledge the limitations and complexities of an approach that blurs everything and resists categories. We see ourselves in the work, in the films and within this writing. At points our thoughts take centre stage, at other points they recede into the background Thinking with Dewey (1934/2005) through research-creation enabled us to live with understandings that were incomplete and dispersed.

#### Running

I was running down the corridor and a teacher told me to stop running, I carried on running, another teacher told me to stop running then I was fast-walking and then I banged into a teacher.

Ms H (a teacher) was running later in the day.

We get to jump on the table which we don't normally get to do in school and its very funny every day when you walk around walking about actually there a tons of odd things.

Now and I did this, I thought like now when I walk around everything's odder and it made me feel happier.

The move between movements is made closer so that the separate-ness of running, jumping and dancing is challenged. Running can make you happy.

Running could be seen as a collective way of being, children do not interact with external objects so much as correspond with them.

Running must be tamed, produced as sport, have meaning, stopped.

## What emerges from this process

Research-creation as an approach offered the potential to reconsider creative production, to fold process into product and to see the *work* produced belonging to both children and adults, in a way that could be described as a 'boundary object'. These are objects that inhabit several communities of practice, but belong to each of them, drawing on definitions from Bowker & Star (1999). The idea of the 'boundary object' helped us to see how the children's film-making could be considered as research. This enabled us to value and engage with the co-produced *work* differently. The short films presented as 'boundary objects', that is, objects that inhabited several communities of practice but didn't belong to any of them (Loveless 2019, 32). The meaning within them felt opaque, and they operated at the edges of the work. There were moments where ideas seemed clear, but the moments that drew our attention were not linear or singular. Rather, the films produced entwined feelings, meanings and thoughts in the making and the watchingback processes.

Thinking about the idea of 'oddness', we considered about how it emerged within our shared stories and refused as a term to stick to a person or be attached to an individual's behaviour. It is descriptive of a situation and associated more with a feeling. In school, ideas on oddness emerged collectively, sometimes from a feeling of uncertainty or the sense that things were different-to-normal. Oddness is associated with the feeling that things are not normal, the sensation of a difference that it is hard to put a finger on. It is often impossible to describe the parts of an odd event, the description brings it to heel, brings it into the sensible. Odd demands a story, a telling and a re-telling, a removal from the event and a mixing-up of things that did happen with things that may have happened. This is how this process took us, the lines of thought are still open and the work is always on-going.

## Conclusion

'I will tell you a story and this is true'. (year five student)

The article explores the potential of recognising young people's creative productions as 'the work' of research. We attempted to restore, following Dewey (1934/2005, 2) the continuities between everyday experience and aesthetic art-making. Our reflections on these processes are layered within a creative making, thinking and doing process. We are trying not to extract from *the* 

work that emerged with the children, but reconfigure our relationship with it and locate it within an experience-oriented concept of research-creation that positions the work of research within an expanded field. This is reflected in the fragments. The turn to research-creation as an approach comes from the need to acknowledge creative work produced with young people as holding a place as a work of research. This is necessary as it pays attention to the thoughts of young people within research, letting ideas remain unresolved and opaque, resisting full contamination by adult schemas and epistemologies yet positioning them within the adult world of research. The form of the work resists attempts to codify collage and juxtapose, ideas flow within the mess of creative production, stories and the imagination.

Our work has been concerned with valuing the young people's films as research. To value young people's creative *works* as outcome of a researchcreation process and identify them as in-process, requires a reorientation and a change not only to what we do but to what we value. Within creative work there is a tendency to over-simplify meaning through a translation into text, leaching affect and emotion from young people's works and thoughts. We acknowledge this, and in no way suggest we are free from it in this or previous projects. By not allowing ourselves to categorise creative work as data or evidence or a tool of illustration requires a different type of attention and ethical consideration. These issues would be present in any type of creative and cultural production with young people, yet within an educational research project that foregrounds children's lived experience there is potential within research-creation to resist dominant modes of deconstruction and analysis that can put words in children's mouths.

Through paying attention to the work produced by young people as a *work* of co-produced research-creation we were able to think differently with young people. The children's thoughts merge with our own, becoming in the end, the *work* as it flows across the playground, and across the page. This gave us an insight into the children's lived experience of school, the experience of running, learning and being different to normal which didnot attach to particular children but helped us understand what it was that children felt in school, and, above all, the oddness of school. Research-creation as an approach helped us keep an eye on the ball of the children's perceptions, but not to co-opt their thinking; in that way, the research process itself echoed our 'oddness' in the process of doing.

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## Note

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