

Embodied, arts-based and participatory research: Approaches to knowledge production in cross-cultural educational contexts

Charlotte Svendler Nielsen ¹ 

¹ Department of Nutrition, Exercise and Sports, University of Copenhagen, Nørre allé 51, 2200 Copenhagen, Denmark

This article outlines embodied, arts-based and participatory approaches to research which were applied in a four-year project inspired by participatory action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005) with a primary school class in South Africa. As an intercultural group of artist-educators and researchers, project partners developed new strategies for teaching through arts-integrated educational practice and explored the children's opportunities for learning. During these processes challenges were encountered when working with established qualitative methods and therefore arts-based methods (Leavy, 2018) were included to help solicit the children's perspectives. The article discusses the potential of these methods to reach out and involve participants in a decolonising research practice in which experienced dilemmas of seeking to understand 'the other' when power issues to do with colour, age and socio-economic status cannot be erased.

Keywords: Embodied learning, interculturality, arts-based methods, participatory action research

Introduction

The aim of this article is to outline embodied, arts-based and participatory approaches to research as they were applied in a four-year project inspired by participatory action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005) with a primary school class in South Africa. The project ran from the pupils were 10 to 13 years of age and focused on exploring ways to integrate artistic activities with different subject matter for the children to learn about a variety of concepts and life issues (Samuel & Svendler Nielsen, 2022). As a group of

artist-educators and researchers of different cultures and colours¹ we developed new strategies for teaching through arts-integrated educational practice and explored the children's opportunities for learning by asking: How can they get to know and understand different concepts in a more embodied way? During these processes we encountered challenges of working with established qualitative methods like the qualitative interview (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014) in a school context which was characterised by teachers having the role as 'those who know' and the children having the role as 'learners'. We therefore needed to approach the children's experiences in other ways and did this by asking if arts-based methods (Leavy, 2018) might help to better solicit the children's perspectives? The article discusses the potential of these methods to reach out and involve participants (Jones, 2022) in a decolonising research practice in which experienced dilemmas of seeking to understand 'the other' when power issues to do with colour, age and socio-economic status cannot be erased.

A teaching-research project moving across borders

From 2017-2020 I co-led an educational research project focusing on arts-integration and intercultural learning which involved a South African primary school class. The partners were from different institutions in South Africa and Denmark and for the four years we worked with the same school class in intensive workshop weeks twice a year. The workshops were centred around engaging in embodied experiences and creative processes to explore and play with the meaning of different concepts. Themes of the workshops were for example: "The seasons and the elements of nature in the South and the North" and "Patterns and pathways in nature and culture." Those might be relevant themes to learn about for children many places in the world, but perhaps in this context

¹ Partners in the group were: *Gerard Samuel*, dance educator experienced in working with differently abled children and in his position as a researcher and teacher of students at the University of Cape Town's School of Dance he focuses on cultural and post-colonial dance studies and phenomenologically inspired research. *Fabian Hartzenberg*, from the Western Cape Education Department's Peter Clarke Arts Centre (PCAC) is a visual arts and design educator experienced in teaching children and in running in-service training of teachers in outreach projects in contexts with few resources including in gang-ridden communities. *Liesl Hartman*, till 2018 director of PCAC, then director of the Education Department of the Zeitz MOCAA museum in Cape Town is a visual artist and educator with experience from both outreach projects and teaching teachers in-service while also being a curator and writer of teaching material. *Peter Vadim*, Danish based dancer, choreographer and landscape architect and experienced facilitator. *Charlotte Svendler Nielsen* has a background in dance and is working at the University of Copenhagen as a researcher in educational studies focused on dance and movement, experienced in arts-based, embodied and visual research methods and in engaging with participants using different kinds of dialogical formats.

they had a different and more existential meaning as people in Cape Town had for a long time been experiencing a drought period which implied worries on a daily basis that today might become "Day Zero" (the day when water would cease to come out of the taps). The last workshop took place in November 2020 just before the end of the class's final year in primary school. This was also at the time when South Africa had just opened its borders again after the first Covid-19 lockdown and pupils were gradually coming back to school.

Bearing in mind that South African educators such as Ursula Hoadley (2017; 2024) and Michael A. Samuel (2024; Samuel et al., 2017) highlight the need for a shift towards more flexible and responsive educational practices that prioritise the needs and interests of students, we decided to focus the project on what could be the value of integrating artistic activities in teaching to the children in this multicultural context. We wished to explore whether this approach could be helpful in a setting, which in international comparisons such as PIRLS and TIMMS² comes out with numbers showing that many children are not learning what they are supposed to learn. We did not have an aim of measuring change in a quantitative manner, but to explore "lived experiences" (van Manen, 1990) that would help to illuminate how it could be meaningful to integrate the art forms with different subject matter from the curriculum.

While developing new strategies for teaching through arts-integrated educational practice we asked whether 'crossing borders' of the teaching and research dimensions of the project could be useful in better helping to explore the children's experiences. Combining teaching and research activities in the workshops turned out to give insights into the children's experiences and meaning-making processes that were not so easy to grasp in more formal interview sessions. Expanding on what we did in the classroom, as well as what we did in interview sessions thus seemed to contribute to producing more information about the children's learning opportunities and teaching and research then became integrated components throughout the project.

The project partners were all artist-educators coming from either the visual arts/design field or the dance field, and some of us also work as researchers. In this project in various ways, we were all part of both educational and research processes, i.e. when

² The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) is an international assessment that monitors trends in fourth grade students' achievement in reading <https://pirls2021.org/> and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) is an international assessment that monitors trends in fourth and eighth grade students' achievements in those fields <https://timss2023.org/>

planning the workshops and carrying them out, while documenting the processes and reflecting on experiences and outcomes as well as when analysing empirical material, theorising and discussing what we found. With time we developed different ways of making use of our various expertise in what we could term “A/R/Tographer” (Irwin et al., 2006) roles considering the active and integrating role of the different expertise of the partners in the project. Although the project had a strong focus on collaboration, the work of illuminating and documenting the children’s experiences was my focus and area of responsibility. The aim of this article is to outline and discuss the approaches developed and implemented by me and I therefore act as the sole author on this occasion but deeply acknowledging that my writing builds on many talks and discussions with the other partners at different stages of the project.³

Seeking to understand ‘the other’ - arts-based approaches to reach out and involve participants in a decolonising research practice?

After two yearly trips to South Africa during seven-eight years one might think that I know a lot about life in that country. Perhaps I know a little more than someone who has never been there, but the more I experience there and the closer I come to the lives of people there, the more I also realise that I do not know and probably never will come to know about life in this country. Because I am not one of ‘them’ – I have not watched the same series on television, been part of numerous family ‘braais’ (barbecues) or know the political history in an embodied way as many there do. Therefore, there are limits to what I can understand and also to what I can become involved in. I can ask questions and people can answer, but what I understand from their answers is closely related to what my own frame of reference and experiences are. Culture is in our bodies; it is in our blood. We carry experiences from our parents and other ancestors that have been inherited through many generations. I see this phenomenon clearly when I am with my colleagues in South Africa. For example, when entering a café or the restaurant of a wine estate and they scan the premises to see who else is there. They are so used from their childhoods to parents acting like this because they had to comply with the apartheid laws. Apartheid

³ From 2019-2025 we have published 11 co-written articles and book chapters based on the project, always including a minimum of one author from the South and one from the North. Before embarking on the writing of this sole-authored article, I discussed my intention of publishing focused on the work of further developing ways of soliciting children’s experiences which I led in the project with other partners.

was abolished over 30 years ago, but it is still alive in the society and hence also in the relationships of people. So, when I as a White, middle-aged woman with a high education and (at least in the eyes of some) a prestigious job as a university researcher enter the door at the school, I enter it with a different perspective than those whom I meet there. The children and teachers at the school are Black and Coloured in many different nuances. The learners were children when we started and young teenagers when we saw them last. They attend school and will (perhaps) one day have a higher education, but most of them will start in jobs already when they leave High school and some of the girls will become pregnant and be mothers before they even graduate (or enter a world of work). But even though we are different, there is a lot that we - to some extent - can understand from the others' lives. We have experiences from movies we have watched, books we have read, what other people have told us, and we can use this to empathically imagine the 'worlds' of others.

It has been challenging to navigate these issues in relation to who could propose what and what expectations were implicit to what kinds of people we represented in the project to start with. With time our different cultures and backgrounds have had less influence. After many visits I was no longer "the rich woman who comes to watch what we do," but "teacher Charlotte who comes and rolls around on the floor with us and talks to us about our lives" (at least this is how one of my South African colleagues in the project sees it). He expressed this in one of many 'drive-and-talk dialogues' in which he also said: "These children see you as someone who comes to play with them and have an interest in their lives because of the way you work with them, but also because you have made the effort to go to their homes and see how they live." This way he expressed that the colonially based power relations are diminished when we as adults for example roll around on the floor with the children in a choreographic exercise. They are diminished, yes, but they are not erased. My position as an 'outsider' in our practice was important although taking this perspective might maintain ideas of 'the other' and (the negative) colonial meanings that this accompanies (Grant & Luxford, 2009). But as an 'outsider' I did not know as much as the 'insiders' and I was focused on trying to understand their perspectives. At the same time, I may have seen something that was taken for granted by the 'insiders' (Grant & Luxford, 2009) of the educational system we were working within. Both of these perspectives were thus key when working in this intercultural project.

Phenomenological and arts-based educational action research: A methodology based on a bricolage approach

The methodology developed for the project, which takes the above considerations into account, we came to name “phenomenological and arts-based educational action research.” The process of this methodology is that workshops are planned as horizontal spiralling cycles of practice and reflection going hand in hand (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005) while also vertically going deeper and deeper in the explorations (see figure 1 below). New developments take point of departure in past experiences and in a process where a change to ways of teaching are planned using the art forms in different ways. The processes are observed, documented and reflected upon in preparation for the next workshop and so forth (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005).

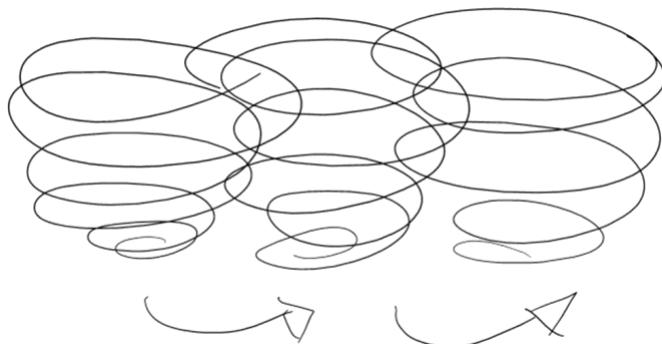


Figure 1: The process of “phenomenological and arts-based educational action research” illustrated as developing in a cyclical format (author’s illustration).

Embodied processes and - knowledge are the focus of the study, hence phenomenological enquiry (Depraz et al., 2003; van Manen, 1990; Todres, 2007; Gendlin, 1997) which can foster insights to sensuous experiences and an understanding of knowledge as intertwined between body-mind-world is acting as the theoretical lens informing the work. The methodology leans on arts-based (Leavy, 2018; Debruin et al., 2018), participatory (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005) and arts-based action research approaches (Wilson & Flicker, 2014) as it includes a strong element of participation for all involved and aims to change practice based on the needs of the local people in combination with more global views and ideas. Central points in this methodology include participatory aspects such as,

- 1) Experiences of all involved are considered important in the process (experiences of children, teachers, artist-educators and researchers are documented and explored in different ways).
- 2) Researchers and artist-educators work together as colleagues with different skills to offer and in different kinds of integrated processes (crossing borders of the artistic disciplines dance, visual arts and design and of research, arts practice and education as different sectors).
- 3) Processes of mutual (professional) learning where the local people have control over the process.

(Post)qualitative research as a frame of thought (Le Grange, 2018a; Adams St. Pierre, 2021) has helped to create coherence in this bricolage of approaches which have been necessary as inspirations to fulfil the specific aim of the project. Inspirations that also were necessary to include in order to connect the different cultural and professional backgrounds and experiences of the participants. At the same time as being different our experiences were, however, also overlapping through our shared view on knowledge as something which can be produced actively in processes when body-mind-world are considered to be interconnected. (Post)qualitative research (Le Grange, 2018a) has helped to connect a Western understanding of knowledge and Indigenous understandings of knowledge to produce both new knowledge(s) and new opportunities for acting in relation to challenges in the education systems we work within.

Developing methods on-the-go to solicit children's perspectives

The focus of the project, asking how the children could get to know and understand different concepts in a more embodied way, deemed it necessary to find out which methods could be of help for producing knowledge about this from a research perspective. One element was what we as researchers (and simultaneously artist-educators) could *observe* in relation to learning opportunities. Another element to consider was how we could produce knowledge about children's *experiences*? During initial attempts to apply a traditional qualitative interview approach (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014) as the base of talking to the children in pairs, we encountered challenges of working with this approach. The school context was characterised by teachers having the role as 'those who know'

and the children having the role as ‘learners’ which meant that the children were not used to expressing their viewpoints. To produce knowledge about other people’s experiences is often done using the form of interviewing, but not all experiences can be accounted for in a verbal language either. When the ‘interviewer’ moreover is an adult who asks children questions, it is an even more challenging endeavour as it is difficult to place oneself in the shoes of ‘the other’, especially when ‘the other’ is of a different age and enters the situation with very different experiences. But age is not the only issue, also being different in terms of socio-economic status and coming from different geographical and language areas pose a challenge for understanding each other. Based on these thoughts and on previous research of the author (Svendler Nielsen, 2009b) we found ways to approach the children’s experiences in other ways than through only the verbal language in the following ways: In the workshop sessions we experimented with reflecting through different modalities and considered how we could use all the products made in these sessions as empirical material for analysis. In the ‘interview’ sessions which involved groups of 3-4 children we started to use dance and visual arts components more systematically for coming closer to the children’s embodied experiences. Hence, in both types of sessions we experimented with ways of integrating dance and visual arts in different exercises and to elicit knowledge about the children’s experiences of doing the exercises. Through the exercises we tried different verbal and non-verbal/arts-based approaches to create a visible relation between their embodied experiences and ways of expressing themselves about those experiences (see box 1 below).

From my previous research we had a tool box of methods which I had developed to illuminate younger children’s experiences and learning opportunities in dance and physical education and decided to start by implementing “multimodal interviewing” (Svendler Nielsen, 2009b) and “videographic participation” (Svendler Nielsen, 2012) to see if those approaches would also be useful in the new context and for the purpose of this project. Based on these methods, with inspiration from the visual arts partners and the activities we co-developed for the workshops, some activities came to have a dual function of fostering learning through reflection while also documenting the learning processes.

Reflective group dialogue formats:

- Group dialogues based on children posing questions
- Stimulated recall based on pictures from workshops
- Walk-and-talk in the place where activities had taken place

Kinaesthetic mapping formats:

- Multi-modal interviewing
- Drawing and painting of embodied experiences
- Body-mind maps of significant places and exercises
- Reflective note writing

Audio-visual documentation / filmmaking:

- Videographic participation
- Photographing (incl. children photographing)

Box 1: Overview of activities used to solicit children's experiences through different modalities.

Example of workshop activity using embodied and arts-based approaches to foster learning and illuminate experiences in a participatory perspective: One series of workshops was focused on concepts that connect us as human beings to places. We called the concepts 'relationship-words'. The aim of this workshop series was multifaceted as it connected to the subject of geography, was about learning concepts in English⁴ and developing the children's intercultural knowledge of these concepts, i.e. how they play a role in our different lives. The aim was integrated with developing artistic skills in the fields of dance and visual arts/design at the same time. Together with the children we made a list of 10 concepts: *Entrance/exit/opening/closing/border/threshold/transition/-barrier/connection/obstacle*. Some of these concepts have multiple meanings which we discussed as a starting point. For example, 'threshold' can mean a doorstep or a beginning of something new and to be in 'transition' can mean to move between two homes or be about entering a different phase of (school) life. To explain the difference between border and barrier one boy put it like this: "A border is something you can cross over, a barrier you can't cross over." Through different exercises we then tried a number of the concepts

⁴ The mother tongue of the children of the class was either Afrikaans or isi-Xhosa. They all also spoke English, but not all at a native speaker level.

using our bodies, for example the concepts of ‘opening’ and ‘closing’ we illustrated using movement in the outdoor sandpit of the school (see pictures 1 and 2 below).



Pictures 1 and 2: The concepts of ‘opening’ and ‘closing’ illustrated using movement in the outdoor sandpit (photos: Authors’ own collection).⁵

With the aim of creating engagement and foster meaning-making processes related to the children’s personal lives, we gave them disposable cameras to take home including a worksheet of the 10 concepts and the task to come back with 10 photos from their homes that would illustrate the concepts. Once developed the photos were used to create group-

⁵ Photos are included with permission from parents from whom we have obtained informed consent for the children to take part in the project, be involved in interviews and to use their words and (audio)visual material in communication of the outcomes of the research in journal articles, presentations and teaching of students through letters informing them about the purpose of the project, how it would be carried out, their right to get insight to material involving their own child, and to withdraw their consent at any moment until publication of articles. We have renewed the informed consent from the parents a number of times between 2017 and 2020. Every time we have started a new project week at the school, we have also informed the children about the purpose of the specific workshop and said to them that it would always be okay to come and tell us if they did not want to be photographed or filmed. We also always asked the specific children when we wanted to record conversations if this was okay and if we wanted to include them in dialogues in smaller groups, we asked on the specific day if they felt like taking part.

based collages of the ‘relationship-words’ using photos from all of the children in a group. The photographs were later used as empirical material for analysis (Jorgensen & Sullivan, 2009) as they illuminated the children’s ‘first-person’ experiences of what they had learned about the concepts we had introduced.



Pictures 3, 4, 5 and 6: Process of working with children's own photos to create collages of 'relationship-words' – here the word 'closing' (photos: Authors' own collection).

Example of research activity using embodied and arts-based approaches to illuminate experiences and foster awareness in a participatory perspective: What keeps living with the children after a workshop week is over? This is an important question when studying learning opportunities. Therefore, we always started a new week by reflecting on what we did when we were last together which mostly was half a year earlier. A girl wrote,

“We lay on the floor and thought about a colour and drew the feeling
and coloured the feeling in the same colour we thought of.”

(Extract from reflective note on 'What I remember from February 2019', 12-year-old girl Sept. 2019)

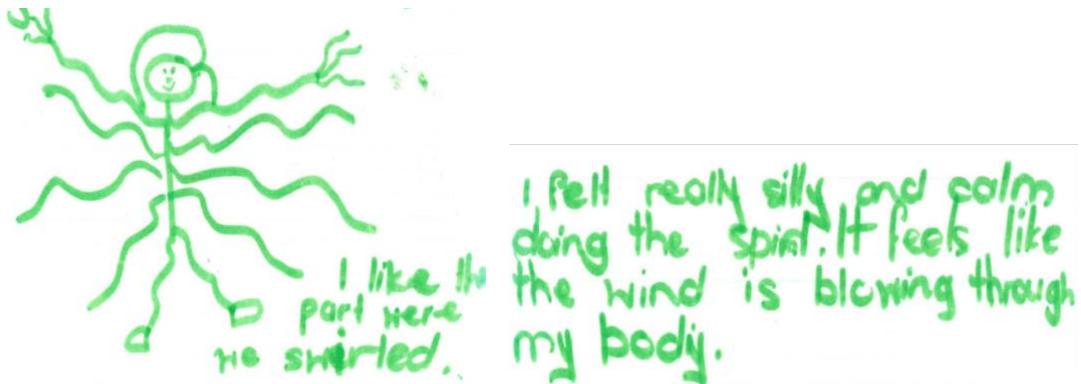
This girl remembered being engaged in this exercise and with regards to her learning opportunities, her sentence tells us that she has become aware that feelings can have different ‘colours’. The fact that she remembers this exercise so clearly tells us that there might have been something about the experience which was different to what she had paid attention to before. Maybe a certain embodied sensation? The way of ‘interviewing’ based on multi-modality that I introduced to the class here is about becoming aware of what philosopher Eugene T. Gendlin (1988) calls our “felt sense.” When doing this type of ‘interview’, which I sometimes did with the full class and other times with smaller groups in a separate room, I started by doing some exercises which helped to foster awareness of embodied experiences. This could be by moving one body part at a time at different speeds, using different levels in space or moving with different dynamic qualities. While moving we attended to the difference in the experiences for each child, asking them to say one word that illustrated how moving in the specific way felt to them. I then asked the children to sit or lay down, and they could close their eyes if they wanted to. I asked them to think about the day’s lessons for a little while and choose a “significant moment” (van Manen, 1990), a moment that they really liked, or maybe disliked or which made them wonder. While still sitting or lying down they had to give the experience a colour, a shape and a sound.



Pictures 7, 8 and 9: Children thinking about a “significant moment” in the day’s lessons (photos: Authors’ own collection).

When they opened their eyes, they had a small card in front of them and in the middle of the room there was a selection of coloured pens. They had to go and pick one of the pens and then on one side of the card they had to draw themselves doing the activity (‘me

doing the movement') and on the other side they had to draw the sensation or write about how it felt to do the activity ('my felt sense of the movement').



Pictures 10 and 11: Cards illustrating one child's response to multi-modal exercise.

Crossings borders of academia and arts practice for production of embodied knowledge

Engaging with multi-faceted cultures was at the heart of the project in order to create new knowledge(s) by crossing those borders that we experience between our cultures, i.e. of different fields of research, education and arts practice as well as the cultures of our different languages and nationalities. In his book "Embodiment and experience: The existential ground of culture and self" the phenomenologically inspired anthropologist Thomas J. Csordas (1994) mentions that we need another word than 'body' when we want to emphasise that what we are thinking of is broader than the biological body. In English the term that is used is 'embodiment'. Embodiment is a theoretical term that broadens the concept of the body as a biological entity to also be an 'entity' that holds feelings and emotions and is socially related to other people and the world around us. In order to be able to give accounts of embodied learning opportunities and to reflect on how embodied learning might be facilitated, the starting point in our project was a theoretical understanding of embodied learning that is grounded in a view of the 'body' as holding multiple dimensions (see figure 2 below). These dimensions can both be experienced and be in focus from a pedagogical viewpoint in a teaching situation – they are the moving, the cultural, the social, the sensing, the creating and the expressive 'bodies' (Svendler Nielsen, 2009a; 2015).

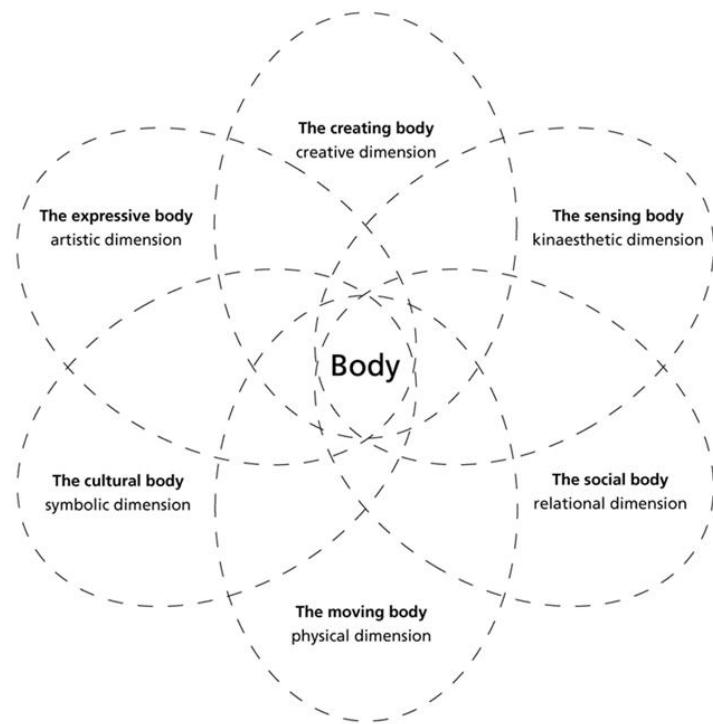


Figure 2: The body's multiple dimensions (Svendler Nielsen, 2015, p.119).

A phenomenological approach in research takes its point of departure in the idea that as human beings we are always physically engaged in the world (Sheets-Johnstone, 1999). Moreover, it puts an emphasis on people's experiences and when researching embodied learning based on this approach, learning can be understood to be about change "connected to new abilities and knowledge, a new sense of agency, ways of participating and expressing and experiencing in relation to oneself, others and/or the subject" (Svendler Nielsen, 2015, p.125). Drawing on these ideas we focused on being aware of situations in which the children seemed to be enjoying what we were doing, to be engaged with a certain focus (by them termed "I was on the moon" and similar expressions of experiencing to be in 'another space' for a moment) and to be touched at a more existential level. This could be when someone raised a hand spontaneously to tell us how this or that also happened in his or her house. Such situations would be signs of learning that was integrated more completely with who they were as 'embodied beings' and as a consequence the comprehension and experience of meaning would perhaps also be of a different quality?

The challenge of verbalising embodied processes

Psychologist Les Todres (2007, p. 23) notes that “even though language and experience are implicated in one another they cannot be reduced to one another nor replace one another in the ongoing aliveness that is understanding“ which points to the challenge of translating between modalities. So, how can we analyse research material that is not only in the form of words? Andrew C. Sparkes (2017, p. 346) also raises the “(...) problem of analysing and verbalising newly acquired physical skills and bodily practices” in research focused on embodied experiences and mentions that “normally our bodies are what Leder (1990) calls an absent-presence in our lives” (Sparkes, 2017, p.345). When we, moreover, are interested in getting access to *other* people’s sensuous experiences we are clearly facing a challenge. Key to Sparkes (2017) is that sensing is a cultural practice as what we pay attention to, or can become aware of, and how we are able to express ourselves about this, is based on previous experiences, that is our cultural and biographical experiences.

To counter the challenges of creating embodied knowledge about other people’s experiences, Sparkes (2015) has carried out long-term ethnographic field studies as a participant and paid attention to his own embodied experiences. He also refers to authors who have countered the challenge by using a combination of creative interview approaches and visual methods (e.g. Mason & Davies (2009) in Sparkes (2017, p. 346)). In our study we combined different embodied and arts-based approaches leaning on previous research of the author (Svendler Nielsen, 2009b; 2012) and inspiration from arts-based research (Leavy, 2018; Debruin et al., 2018) (see the overview of methods in box 1). But we can ask whether there still might be a translation problem as well as a problem concerning the fact that when taking point of departure in a phenomenological and experiential approach, we also need to acknowledge that our previous experiences are different and therefore we can never experience ‘the same’. For this project we found “stimulated recall interviews” (Vestereinen et al., 2010) useful which is also supported by Sarah Pink (2021) who notes that watching photographs stimulates a multi-sensuous reflection. This can likewise be supported in theories of multi-modality, for example Marcel Danesi (2007) who describes how we can understand that sensation in one mode can be evoked by sensations in a different mode.

Another approach we applied was Gendlin’s (1988) “focusing technique” and including drawings which was helpful to illuminate meaning-making (Wright, 2010)

through the children's expressions about their "felt sense" of different experiences. These approaches all together could help foster descriptions of "significant moments" which are central when we want to understand human experience and lived meanings (van Manen, 1990, p.163). Based on the idea that research as a performative practice can contribute to reaching and involving communities (Le Grange, 2018a; Jones, 2022), in the phase of analysis we looked for "evocative moments" (Degerbøl & Svendler Nielsen, 2014). Thus, from a phenomenological perspective we acknowledged that the embodied, first-person experiences of the participants, when aiming at understanding what happened in relation to the children's learning opportunities, are important. In the drawings and texts written by the children we found their selected 'moments' and when looking for 'moments' in the (audio)visual material we focused on the response of our own bodies – we were part of the situations, and our bodies (we) remembered what were "significant pedagogical moments" (van Manen, 1990).

Turning to (post)qualitative research to cross borders of South/North ideas

Sparkes (2017, p. 343) is opposing the so-called 'linguistic turn' in qualitative research when noting that "work conducted within this framework tended to privilege and produce abstract theories and disembodied accounts of the corporeal realities of daily life." Perhaps a stronger movement away from the linguistic turn is also of utmost relevance when we do research in places and with people who do not have the same mother tongue as ourselves? In the West (and Global North) this movement can be said to have started with cognitive scientists, linguists and philosophers turning to exploring human mind processes as embodied (e.g. Damasio, 2000; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999) to researchers now being in search of new ways of understanding knowledge(s) (in plural) and aiming at doing this by emphasising the embodied-sensuous dimension and not only considering this in a human and individually oriented perspective. A dimension which is favoured in arts-based methods and Indigenous philosophies (Le Grange, 2018a).

With inspiration from the notion of Ubuntu, which is highlighted in Indigenous philosophies pertinent to the Southern part of Africa and which can be translated to "I am because we are," the teaching and research practice we developed can be considered to have helped decolonising both of those practices because the children's perspectives, ideas and experiences were in focus (Kuri, 2020). Arts-based methods have helped to

foster experiences both of Ubuntu and of being part of something that is bigger than oneself (Leavy, 2018). Thus, also fostering experiences of *Ukama* which means that everything in the universe is connected (Le Grange, 2018a). When working with arts-based research methods it is immanent that there are no set or true answers, knowledge is produced in participatory and sometimes collaborative processes and often by including different materials and in close relation to the place where the activities are going on. Therefore, in such processes there is the potential that everyone can experience that they have valuable contributions to offer from exactly their perspectives.

Le Grange (2018b, p.52) critically notes that “Ubuntu might have emerged as a construct at a time when the world was less densely populated, when kinship networks were stronger and when people lived close to the land, but it can now also play a new role in a technology mediated world and inform thought that needs to be responsive to the Earth’s rapid destruction (...).” At the same time, he emphasises that whether it is relevant to connect research to the notion of Ubuntu depends on which theory is chosen to inform the (post)qualitative approach. He does not unfold this point further but seems to be advocating for theories that consider body-mind-world as connected to be more relevant than for example a poststructuralist understanding of language and knowledge. Key ideas of phenomenology are overlapping with ideas of Eastern philosophies which like African philosophies can be considered ‘Indigenous’ and monist understandings. (Post)qualitative research considers it artificial to divide epistemology, ontology, axiology and methodology in practice of research in which knowledge and being are considered to be two sides of the same coin (Le Grange, 2018b). Therefore, this approach seems relevant to combine with phenomenology and Ubuntu as philosophies as the base for a project which had the intention of crossing borders between knowledge, being and practice to develop new practices (of teaching and doing research).

Le Grange (2018a) refers to Jin-Ting Wu et al. (2018 in Le Grange, 2018a, p.11) who also make the argument that (post)qualitative research ought to refer to Indigenous philosophies like Taoism and Ubuntu to not ”remain a construct of the west (the Global North).” This critique, according to Le Grange (2018a), might also imply to which degree those who consider qualitative research in a ‘post’ perspective are explicit about the importance of context when applying this perspective. If not, he questions, perhaps it is a construct mostly relevant in the Western world? Le Grange’s (2018a) discussion of the

notion of Ubuntu in a (post)qualitative research perspective and focusing on the relevance of the latter in a South African context is relevant to include when outlining the methodological inspirations for this project. The participatory elements of developing new approaches to teaching and research were what helped foster a practice in which using imagination and creativity helped to share experiences about the challenges that were part of these children's daily lives to do with both climate changes, the Covid-19 crisis, and poverty.

As in the workshops we included a strong focus on the human-nature dimension in line with the Indigenous philosophies, it might have been relevant also to consider the agency of Nature in line with ideas of (post)humanism (Braidotti, 2013; Adams St. Pierre, 2021) as a base for the project. However, when considering Le Grange's (2018a) remarks about the context of South Africa and (post)qualitative research, we questioned whether positive changes of the issues that the children experienced in their context, rather had to start from better understanding and strengthening of the human-to-human relationships? From a phenomenological perspective we could consider them as agents in their own lives and working on developing their "sense-of-agency" (Sheets-Johnstone, 1999, p. 70). We could do this through creating languages (including bodily and artistic) about what they experienced. Using this knowledge, we could produce ideas of how to act to create changes based on what was meaningful to them.

Practicing an immanent ethics

A question which we constantly came back to during the project was whether there were any ethical problems in opening a space of sensuous awareness when not all prior experiences are positive? This is the case for many people in South Africa, especially in the Township areas where many live lives characterised by constant trauma. Le Grange (2017, p. 102) notes that questions about ethics in a (post)qualitative perspective are immanent in the whole process of research. It is not just some externally defined rules prevalent in the "ethical clearance regimes that have become commonplace in universities." In line with our thoughts Le Grange also refers to Daniel W. Smith (2012, p. 285 in Le Grange, 2018a, p. 9) to unfold the notion of an immanent ethics underlining that,

(...) the fundamental question of ethics is not 'What must I do?' (the question of morality) but rather 'What can I do?' Given my degree of power, what are my capabilities and capacities? How can I come into active possession of my power? How can I go to the limit of what I 'can do'.

The school where we worked takes children from the working-class area where it is situated, but also from different Townships further away. A great number of the children live lives where many ills have become even worse during the time of Covid, caused by long and strict lockdowns creating more poverty and as a result crime and violence. South Africa is not in war with another country, but there are wars between gangs in the areas of these children, and it is a country that for a long while has been under pressure due to lack of resources like water, electricity and money for most people. Considering what could be called an 'immanent ethical practice of care', we deliberately used an approach to teaching that started from experiencing, exploring and 'playing with' different abstract concepts which gave the children freedom to choose how to respond. It did not start from examples from their own private lives or had an intention to be therapeutic, but they could choose what was interesting and important to them. There is, however, not always a sharp line between education and therapy because education might foster experiences of healing. For example, exercises we did when we first met again after the first hard lockdown period had this impact on me, as it really was the first time that I had thought about and shared my lockdown experiences. Maybe it was the same for the children? I shared my thoughts about this with the class teacher in an interview that I carried out with her in relation to our last workshop week in November 2020. Her response was that she thinks working with the arts helped the children release some of the tension they were carrying due to Covid. In a group interview based on questions that the children posed to each other, the response to one of the girl's question: "How have the activities helped you with your day-to-day life?" indirectly might illustrate that at least to the girl who posed the question, this might have been something that she also had experienced as an element of the project.

Research that extends beyond research – research for social change

Why might crossing borders of disciplines like teaching and research and of different arts and other school subjects using participatory approaches be important considering future perspectives of (arts) education? The strong focus on embodied sensitivity in the pedagogy developed through the action cycles (see figure 1) in this project seems, as a biproduct, to foster a teaching environment that is simultaneously nurturing sensitivity and trust in the relationships among all those involved. Work like this will not solve the world's major problems, but it might be able to have impact on the lives of specific groups by empowering them to question, live and respond to challenges in their lives.

In the next phase of our collaboration, which started in 2021 we focused on how to implement embodied-artistic pedagogy in the education of student and in-service teachers. The university students noted that the activities made them "feel light," that they could "breathe better." Thus illustrating similar experiences as the children had. But is it as simple as that? "That art makes you feel calm"? As one of the children expressed in a reflective note at one point. That it makes us feel calm, because the creative process helps release tension, helps us breathe and feel grounded? Because it gives possibilities to be in 'another world' for a while?

In the project that this article refers to, arts-based research proved useful in engaging the children actively in knowledge production about their own and others' embodied experiences and helped solicit the children's perspectives as it, to some extent, helped to diminish power relations. The initial aim of the research was to explore the value of integrating artistic activities in teaching in multicultural contexts as part of creating better learning opportunities and thus eventually be able to contribute to social change. During the time of the project this became expanded to questioning whether the political endeavour of decolonising the educational system of South Africa which is promoted by emphasising change of *contents* might also benefit from changing *approaches* to teaching (and to research)? This then would impact both the purpose of education to be more meaningful and that the children would engage in different ways and thus - all in all - learn more of what is in the curricula and about what is important in their lives.

References

Adams St. Pierre, E. (2021). Why post qualitative inquiry? *Qualitative Inquiry*, 27(2), 163-166.

Braidotti, R. (2013). *The posthuman*. The Polity Press.

Brinkmann, S. & Kvæle, S. (2014). *InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications Inc.

Csordas, T. J. (Ed.) (1994). *Embodiment and experience: The existential ground of culture and self*. Cambridge University Press.

Damasio, A. (2000). *The feeling of what happens: Body, emotion and the making of consciousness*. Random House.

Danesi, M. (2007). *The quest for meaning: A guide to semiotic theory and practice*. University of Toronto Press.

Debruin, L., Burnard, P. & Davies, S. (Eds.) (2018). *Creativities in arts education, research and practice: International perspectives for the future of learning and teaching*. Sense Publishers.

Degerbøl, S. & Svendler Nielsen, C. (2014). Researching embodied learning by using videographic participation for data collection and audiovisual narratives for dissemination - illustrated by the encounter between two acrobats. *Ethnography and Education*, 10(1), 60-75.

Depraz, N., Varela, F. J. & Vermersch, P. (Eds.) (2003). *On becoming aware*. John Benjamins Publishing Company

Gendlin, E. T. (1988). *Focusing* (2nd ed.). Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing.

Gendlin, E. T. (1997). *Experiencing and the creation of meaning: A philosophical and psychological approach to the subjective*. Northwestern University Press.

Grant, J. & Luxford, Y. (2009). Video: A decolonising strategy for intercultural communication in child and family health within ethnographic research. *International Journal of Multiple Research Approaches*, 3(3), 218–232.

Hoadley, U. (2017). *Pedagogy in poverty: Lessons from twenty years of curriculum reform in South Africa*. Routledge.

Hoadley, U. (2024). Beyond curriculum binaries: Subjects and competencies. In E. Rata (Ed.), *Research handbook on curriculum and education* (pp. 128-144). Edward Elgar Publishing.

Irwin, R. L., Beer, R., Springgay, S., Grauer, K., Xiong, G. & Bickel, B. (2006). The rhizomatic relations of a/r/tography. *Studies in Art Education*, 48(1), 70–88.

Jones, K. (Ed.) (2022). *Doing Performative Social Science: Creativity in doing research and reaching communities*. Routledge.

Jorgenson, J. & Sullivan, T. (2009). Accessing children's perspectives through participatory photo interviews. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 11(1), Art. 8.

Kemmis, S. & McTaggart, R. (2005). Participatory action research: Communicative action and the public sphere. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed.) (pp. 559-604). Sage publishers.

Kuri, E. L. (2020). Ethics in arts-based research: Drawing on the strengths of creative arts therapists. *Canadian Journal of Counselling and Psychotherapy*, 54(3), 197–219.

Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. (1999). *Philosophy in the flesh: The embodied mind and its challenge to Western thought*. Basic Books.

Le Grange, L. (2017). Environmental education after sustainability. In B. Jickling & S. Sterling (Eds.), *Post-sustainability: Remaking education for the future* (pp. 93-107). Palgrave MacMillan.

Le Grange, L. (2018a). What is (post)qualitative research? *South African Journal of Higher Education* 32(5), 1-14.

Le Grange, L. (2018b). The notion of Ubuntu and the (post)humanist condition. In J. Petrovic & R. Mitchell (Eds.), *Indigenous philosophies of education around the world* (pp. 40-60). Routledge.

Leavy, P. (Ed.) (2018). *Handbook of arts-based research*. The Guilford Press.

Pink, S. (2021). *Doing visual ethnography*. Sage Publications.

Samuel, G. M. & Svendler Nielsen, C. (2022). Conversations: Changing life perspectives through a microtopia of integrated arts education in a South African Primary School. In K. Jones (Ed.), *Doing Performative Social Science: Creativity in doing research and reaching communities* (pp. 109-122). Routledge.

Samuel, M. A. (2024). The quest for magnanimity: Tensions and paradoxes. *Journal of Education*, 94, 50-58.

Samuel, M. A., Dhunpath, R. & Amin, N. (Eds.). (2017). *Disrupting higher education curriculum: Undoing cognitive damage*. Springer.

Sheets-Johnstone, M. (1999). *The primacy of movement*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Sparkes, A. C. (2015). Ethnography as a sensual way of being: Methodological and representational challenges. In G. Molnar & L. Purdy (Eds.), *Ethnographies in sport and exercise research* (pp. 45-58). Routledge.

Sparkes, A. C. (2017). Researching the senses in sport and exercise. In B. Smith & A. C. Sparkes (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of qualitative research in sport and exercise* (pp. 343-354). Routledge.

Svendler Nielsen, C. (2009a). *Ind i bevægelsen: Et performativt fænomenologisk feltstudie om kropslighed, mening og kreativitet i børns læreprocesser i bevægelsesundervisning i skolen* [Into the movement: A performative phenomenological field study about embodiment, meaning and creativity in children's learning processes in movement education in primary school]. PhD thesis. Department of Exercise and Sport Sciences, University of Copenhagen.

Svendler Nielsen, C. (2009b). Children's embodied voices: Approaching children's experiences through multi-modal interviewing. *Phenomenology & Practice*, 3(1), 80-93.

Svendler Nielsen, C. (2012). Looking for children's experiences in movement. The role of the body in "videographic participation." *Forum Qualitative Social Research*, 13(3), art. 18.

Svendler Nielsen, C. (2015). Exploring learning in dance as artistic-educational practice. In C. Svendler Nielsen & S. Burridge (Eds.), *Dance education around the world: Perspectives on dance, young people and change* (pp.117-126). Routledge.

Todres, L. (2007). *Embodied enquiry: Phenomenological touchstones for research, psychotherapy and spirituality*. Palgrave Macmillan.

van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. State University of New York Press.

Vestereinen, O., Toom, A. & Patrikainen, S. (2010). The stimulated recall method and ICTs in research on the reasoning of teachers. *International Journal of Research and Method*, 33(2), 183-197.

Wright, S. (2010). *Understanding creativity in early childhood*. SAGE Publications.

Wilson, C. & Flicker, S. (2014). Arts-based action research. In D. Coghlan & M. Brydon-Miller (Eds.), *The SAGE encyclopedia of action research* (pp.2-8). SAGE Publications.

About the author

Charlotte Svendler Nielsen, PhD is Associate Professor in Educational Studies at the University of Copenhagen, the Department of Nutrition, Exercise and Sports. Her research focuses on embodied experiences, learning, well-being and interculturality in dance and arts-integrated practices. Between 2017-2020 and 2021-2025 she co-led cross-border research projects with partners from South Africa and Denmark, first focusing on the impact of embodied artistic pedagogies on children's learning experiences and secondly on implementation of such pedagogies in training of student and in-service teachers. From 2019-2024 she was Chair of the European Network of Observatories in the Field of Arts and Cultural Education (ENO), an organisation in official partnership with UNESCO.