Anti-ableist pedagogy through the arts: Portraits of Inclusive Artmaking with Children and Families

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how visual art can be made 'visible' beyond sight through inclusive art making with 16 young children and their families. Drawing on a yearlong community playgroup project, the study is grounded in anti-ableist pedagogy, Lundy's (2007) model of participation, and Malaguzzi's (1996) concept of the 'hundred languages of children.' Using portraiture methodology (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), the research captures lived moments of sensory-rich art making where participation unfolded as relational, multimodal, and transformative.

Six portraits are presented within this paper. Each illustrates how children's 'voices' were expressed through touch, rhythm, gesture, experimentation, memory, and laughter, and how the children's perspectives influenced curriculum and pedagogy. Rather than treating inclusion as 'accommodation' or 'adaptation', taking an anti-ableist stance from the outset created opportunities to remake the pedagogical space itself as a place for everyone, enriching the experiences of all children.

The findings of this study highlight the potentiality of inclusive artmaking as a site of agency, joy, and belonging. In this study we argue that when educators begin from anti-ableist pedagogy and a presumption of all, participation is not only possible but generative.

KEYWORDS

anti-ableist pedagogy; children's participation; portraiture methodology; inclusive early childhood education; multimodal art-making; children's voices; children's rights

INTRODUCTION

When we think about participation, we can often assume that simply including children in educational experiences means we are honouring children's rights. But true participation, as envisioned in Articles 12 and 13 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (UNICEF, 1989), requires more than just presence. It requires that children in all the many diverse ways of communicating are genuinely given opportunities to participate and contribute and that these contributions are recognised, responded to, and that children's contributions have influence. Upholding children's rights, therefore, also requires respecting children as capable rights holders who have and can express their views and preferences (Clark & Statham, 2005).

In many visual art contexts, participation is still implicitly defined by the assumption of being a sighted person. This visual focus of visual arts is not, of course, a problem inherently. However, it creates a situation where children who are blind or have low vision may be physically present but may not be afforded meaningful opportunities to engage in artmaking. This exclusion is not intentional, but it is deeply embedded in ableist assumptions about humans and ways of participating in art (Penketh, 2020). Anti-ableist pedagogy challenges these (and many other) assumptions (Broderick & Lalvani, 2017).

Anti-ableist pedagogy is not about making adaptations after the fact but about reimagining art, pedagogy, and participation from the outset. Anti-ableist pedagogies challenge us to move beyond default practices that centre vision and verbal language, for example, and instead design environments and experiences where all children, in all the diverse ways of doing, being, communicating, and participating, can engage, express, and connect. Anti-ableist pedagogy leads us to ask: Whose voices are recognised as valid? Whose ways of knowing are centred? And what are we going to do about it?

This paper contributes to ongoing work in early childhood that seeks to centre children's perspectives by further leveraging the 'hundred languages' of children as children

communicate through gesture, touch, movement, sound, silence, material, imagination and relationship (Malaguzzi, 1996; Salamon, Gibbs, & Cooke, 2024). This paper also builds on calls for democratic practice in early childhood education, within which adults create space for children's perspectives to come to the fore, actively shaping pedagogy (Bertram et al., 2024). Finally, the paper is situated within the tradition of portraiture methodology (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), which portrays lived experience in ways that resist deficit framings and highlight dignity, joy, and resilience. Portraiture is particularly suited to inclusive pedagogy because it allows us to recognise and value children in all the diverse ways of being (Karaolis, 2020: Waite, 2024).

This paper presents a series of portraits from a community playgroup project nurturing inclusive artmaking. The portraits capture the rich ways children engaged with art through touch, sound, gesture, rhythm, and memory. They show how anti-ableist pedagogy reconfigured participation, not as a goal to work toward, but as the foundation from which we begin.

Theoretical Framing and Literature

Three interwoven frameworks underpin this work, mobilised through an anti-ableist lens. Anti-ableist pedagogy challenges dominant views of participation that stem from the myth of the 'normal person' and therefore equate participation with speaking or seeing, for example (Niland & Cologon, 2024). Instead, anti-ableist pedagogy affirms that all the diverse ways of knowing, being, and expressing ourselves as humans are valid and valuable. Rather than seeing diverse ways of engaging with the world as deviations to accommodate, anti-ableist pedagogy positions diversity as central and generative.

In art, this means refusing to privilege one way of doing or being (Penketh, 2020). For example, rather than assuming participation in visual art through sight, creating conditions where multiple sensory modalities are central. Anti-ableist pedagogy requires critique of systemic barriers, such as the way conventional art galleries do not facilitate touch or the way curricula often privilege speech and vision. While often the status quo, these are not neutral but ableist default assumptions or practices. Anti-ableist pedagogy reframes such barriers not as individual deficits but as exclusions produced by systems and practices.

Lundy's (2007) Model of Participation Lundy created a model of participation that supports the upholding of Article 12 of the CRC through four components, including: space, voice, audience, and influence.

Space means creating environments where children can safely, freely, and comfortably express themselves. It is our work as educators and researchers to facilitate opportunities where children can do this.

Voice recognises that expression is multimodal. Children's communication might be through touch, gesture, repetition, affect, or material arrangement. As educators and researchers, it is our responsibility to notice and value these expressions.

Audience means that children are not only allowed to express themselves, but that their expressions are also listened to, by adults and by peers. Influence is perhaps the most challenging and yet arguably the most important component. Influence requires us to genuinely respond to what children express and, in-so-far as possible, ensure that this shapes what happens next. Ultimately, Lundy's model enables us to understand influence not as exceptional, or a privilege, but as an everyday right.

Malaguzzi's 'hundred languages of children' (1996) beautifully draws attention to the fact that children communicate in a myriad of ways. Communication is not limited to words. Children express themselves through movement, gesture, silence, material, sound, and relationship. Through an anti-ableist lens, these 'hundred languages' are not poetic metaphors but political commitments that demand that as researchers and educators we refuse to privilege narrow forms of expression as the only legitimate, valid, recognised and valued forms of communication. A process that Murray (2019, p. 1) describes as "attending to – children's feelings, beliefs, thoughts, wishes, preferences and attitudes."

Taken together, within this study, these frameworks challenge us to see artmaking not as a visual process or product, but as relational, embodied, and co-constructed pedagogy that is explicitly anti-ableist.

Methodology: Portraiture

This study employs the methodology of portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Portraiture is a methodology that blends ethnography, narrative, and phenomenological methods within artistic expression, thus creating space to portray lived experience in ways that honour dignity and complexity (Waite, 2024). In so doing, portraiture brings the audience closer in relationship with the people, practices, and contexts being explored. Portraiture is sometimes misunderstood as 'just storytelling' but it is a rigorous, relational, and accountable methodology (Karaolis, 2020; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016; Travis, 2020).

Portraiture requires sustained observation, listening, and relational accountability, seeking 'goodness', not as 'perfection', but as human flourishing, dignity, resilience and relational richness (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983). Karaolis (2020) demonstrates how portraiture can be used to highlight children's strengths and resist deficit-based framings, which is a principle echoed in this study.

In this project, portraiture allowed sustained closeness to the subtle, moment-by-moment ways that children and adults make meaning together. Rather than abstracting or generalising, portraiture creates space to explore and show how theory and practice are entangled in the everyday. Portraiture as a methodology in this project also honoured

children and educators as knowledge holders – not as subjects to be studied, but as co-constructors of pedagogy and insight. In a project about artmaking, it seems especially fitting that, as Lawrence-Lightfoot (2016, p. 6) puts it, portraiture is “as close as possible to painting with words.” For this purpose, detailed field notes were collected during each playgroup session, along with detailed notes on meetings with the playgroup teacher. These fieldnotes were written by the first author immediately following the conclusion of each playgroup session, as well as during and following each teacher meeting. In developing the portraits, the first author reviewed the fieldnotes in depth multiple times to enable the development of portraits that captured the richness of the data. The portraits were then read by the second and third authors to review for completeness and coherence.

Through this methodological lens, this paper presents a piece of qualitative research that invites the audience to feel, reflect, and reimagine. The portraits hold within them theory, practice, ethics, and possibility.

The study took place in a community playgroup supporting families who may be experiencing isolation, whether due to disability, social circumstances, or a lack of access to inclusive early learning environments. The playgroup focuses on creating a warm, welcoming, and interactive space for children and their families to immerse themselves in inclusive early childhood experiences. From the outset, the educators in this setting committed to creating an inclusive and relational learning environment where every child and family, regardless of their modes of communication or perception, could participate fully. This included careful thinking not only about the physical space, materials, and activities, but also the underpinning pedagogical assumptions.

This research took place across sequential weeks within a 12-month project, where educators, children, and families co-constructed a journey of inclusive art-making. The project involved 16 young children, aged between 10 months and 6 years and their families. The nature of the playgroup meant that families included a mix of parents, grandparents, and other family members and friends. What unfolds is a story of transformation, where the boundaries of ‘visual’ art are expanded, and where the sensory world becomes a site of shared joy, agency, and meaning-making. Fieldnotes, sustained observations, and co-reflections with educators informed the portraits presented here.

Each portrait is both data and analysis, presenting a story in the participants’ voices and gestures, and reflection connects each portrait to theory. This methodology enables children’s experiences to be ‘heard’ directly, while situating them within broader pedagogical and theoretical ideas.

Findings: Portraits of Inclusive Art-Making

Portrait 1: Painting with Dervla

In a sunlit art corner, a three-year-old child, let's call her Dervla, is finger painting. The cool, sticky paint spreading beneath her fingers.

Dervla is blind so she can feel the paints but cannot see them with her eyes. An educator, let's call her Suz, sits close by, acting as a co-creator and narrator.

"This one is red. Red like the strawberries from morning tea," Suz says softly, guiding Dervla's hand to a new dollop of paint.

"Now yellow, like the warm sun on our skin… and here's blue, like the big ocean." What we can hear is pedagogical practice shaped by anti-ableist values. Suz meets Dervla where she is, centering tactile and auditory modes of engagement.

The verbal descriptions add a narrative layer, not as instruction but as partnership, a shared language of touch and imagination.

"As Dervla spreads the colours across the paper with open palms, Suz asks how the paint feels, introducing words like smooth, cold, and sticky.

Suz comments on Dervla's motions: "*I can see you moving your hands up and down the paper… now you're making little dots. Dot, dot, dot."*

Smiling and giggling a little, Dervla makes the dot movement more pronounced. Now the dots can be heard as well, splatting onto the paper.

Suz' ongoing verbal description layers a visual narrative onto Dervla's tactile experience, making the art accessible through sound and touch.

Dervla's face beams with a broad smile. She giggles, enthusiastically now using her whole palms to make paint splatters.

Dervla's preferences and emotions are wordlessly clear. She leans in eagerly for more paint (showing curiosity and preference), and her laughter communicates delight.

These moments demonstrate how inclusive early childhood art experiences can foster autonomy, wellbeing, and identity. They also show how the boundaries of 'visual' art can be stretched and how visual art can be felt, narrated, and shared in diverse ways, as it is made 'visible' beyond sight.

This portrait illustrates anti-ableist pedagogy in action. Rather than excluding Dervla from a visual art activity, the educator, Suz, creates multimodal access through touch, texture, and narration. Dervla's joy and laughter are central here – her giggles, her eagerness, and her tactile engagement signal agency and autonomy with these joyful communications countering deficit framings.

Portrait 2: Shared Participation

Soon, another child, let's call this child Tenzin, joins in.

Tenzin, at first wordlessly, follows the rhythm of the interaction and then, adding further, spreading the paint side to side and up and down like Dervla.

The relational connection between children and teacher is palpable. They are collaborators, Suz carefully attuned to the children's cues and the children responding with enthusiasm.

The interaction crackles with joy. Children revelling in sensory discovery, an adult listening beyond words and everyone celebrating every splatter and squeal.

Suz meets Dervla and Tenzin where they are, affirming that seeing is only one of many ways to engage with art and seamlessly inviting other children to join the experience.

This is also a moment of spontaneous inclusion. Dervla and Tenzin are not working side by side, but together. They are in dialogue through movement and materials. Suz remains close, gently narrating and affirming each child's actions.

There's no competition or correction, only co-creation.

Tenzin's contribution builds on Dervla's, and vice versa. The space becomes electric with shared joy.

Laughter and paint splatters mix with sensory discovery and careful, attuned observation.

This is what happens when relationships are at the centre of anti-ableist pedagogy. The educator is listening with her whole self, not just to words, but to gestures, textures, rhythms. Within that listening, the educator makes space for children to listen to one another. In doing so, participation becomes relational, not individual as Suz listens beyond words, children co-create, and the space becomes one of shared joy. Anti-ableist pedagogy is evident in how Dervla's tactile engagement is not treated as 'special' but becomes part of a collective practice.

Portrait 3: The Interactive Gallery

Suz reflects on how to honour Dervla's agency and autonomy in art-making.

I (Kathy) share with Suz about an art exhibition that featured works by artists who are blind or have low vision.

The exhibition is finished, so together we get creative and plan an interactive art experience filled with opportunities for touch and sound.

The playgroup space is transformed into an interactive gallery. The children are invited to touch the artworks.

A radical shift from common gallery experiences and opportunities.

Suz guides the children to the first artwork.

Dervla's hands grip the cool, curved surface of a metal sculpture, feeling all around it.

The children run their fingers along tactile paintings and sculptures.

"Feel this rough part!" … "It's like a tree bark!" …

"Whoa, there are little bumps here, like bubbles."

Dervla is among them, running her fingers and hands around each artwork.
Tapping, floating, rubbing gently.

In this playspace turned gallery, the typical rules and spaces of art are transformed.
Touch, dialogue, and shared discovery are inclusive ways of being.

The group is particularly captivated by one piece inspired by an artwork called Deep Sea Dive, by artist Samantha Ogilvie.

The children explore this large mixed-media artwork that bursts with oceanic textures. Sand coats parts of the painted background. Seashells of various shapes are embedded across it. Clusters of glass represent water droplets. A thick, knotted rope and a length of metal chain sweep down, intertwined with pieces of coral and driftwood.

The children gather around this piece in wonder. They take turns gently touching each element, guided by both sight and touch.

"We have these!" one child exclaims, fingering a tiny glass bead.

This sparks a chorus of excited observations.

"Here's a shell. It's so smooth!" says Harry, gently placing his hand under Dervla's hand and moving together with her up to the shell.

"And this rope is scratchy," Siya adds, running her fingers along its rough fibres.

Dervla puts one hand on the rope and holds the chain with the other, smiling as the metal links clink softly each time she moves them.

The children are not only sharing space, but they are also sharing ways of knowing. They are building meaning collaboratively through touch, sound, and dialogue.

The tactile elements of the artworks invite all children to 'see' differently. For Dervla, this is her primary mode of engagement. For her peers, it becomes an exciting new form of exploration. The unspoken but usual hierarchies of 'ability' or participation are suspended. Every child is both teacher and learner, artist and audience.

Suz prompts the children with open-ended questions:

"What do these textures remind you of?"
"Have we felt something like this before?"

The artwork creates a sense of bringing the beach to us, and the children immediately make that connection.

As I listen, I notice the ways the children and adults support each other in finding textures and objects to feel, describing out loud everything they notice when at the beach. The sand between their toes, the smell of saltwater, the crash of the waves, the wind in their hair, the treasures they might find washed ashore.

“Remember when we found shells on the sand?”

“This feels like the anchor on grandpa’s boat!”

The experience is a collaborative learning opportunity, where children lead the discussion as much as the adults, and every sensory discovery is shared communally.

This gallery experience affirms that art can be encountered in multiple ways, and that all of them are valuable.

Dervla is not made to ‘fit’ into a visual paradigm. Instead, the paradigm shifts to include and celebrate multiple ways of engaging together.

And then...
Seizing on this enthusiasm, plans begin for a beach excursion. In this moment, the children’s voices are directly influencing their curriculum.

By dismantling the gallery convention of ‘do not touch,’ the educators enact an anti-ableist critique. Touch, dialogue, and shared discovery become valid ways of knowing. Children’s awe, delight, and collaborative exploration illustrate how inclusion transforms the entire learning community.

Portrait 4: The Beach Excursion

And so, thoroughly protected from the sun and with plenty of water in tow, our next adventure takes us to a nearby beach.

The children kick off their shoes and delight in the feel of warm sand.
They collect and share small beach treasures. A curly dried piece of seaweed, smooth pebbles, a couple of delicate shells, a piece of driftwood.

There is a playful freedom in the air. Some children race along the water’s edge. Other children crouch down to examine treasures in the sand.

Dervla walks slowly, navigating the uneven sandy ground.

“Windy!” she says, a big smile spreading over her face as she lifts her face up and feels the wind whip her hair around.

Here again, the children immerse themselves in sensory experience. Bare feet in the sand, wind in their hair, salt on their lips.

As they explore, they make links between the real beach and the artworks they had previously touched.

Tenzin, Piper and Dervla examine a shard of coral. “It’s bumpy and hard,” says Piper, offering the coral to Dervla in her hand, “kind of like in that painting.”

The connection between the gallery artwork and the real beach is made explicit as the children compare their finds with the art piece’s materials.

“My shell is smaller than the one in the painting,” Bella points out. “And listen, when I shake this seaweed, it sounds all sloshy. The seaweed on the art didn’t make noise.”

Their observations show careful, sensory attention.

The children want to bring all their treasures back with them.

Suz gently reminds everyone about the beach ecosystem. A brief, authentic opportunity to learn and remember sustainability and respect for Country, sparked by the children’s own curiosity.

What’s happening here is a living demonstration of Lundy’s principle of Influence. The children’s ideas are not just recognised and valued, they’re shaping the curriculum. And this influence is supported by attuned educators who are willing to share power, listen, and follow the children’s lead. This beach excursion was not a one-off event. It was part of an ongoing, co-constructed process where children’s perspectives, memories, and discoveries continued to inform the direction of the learning. The sensory richness and joy of the beach experience highlight anti-ableist pedagogy as a pedagogy of listening, following children’s ideas, and validating their ways of knowing.

Portrait 5: The Collaborative Art Studio

Back together a week later, the excitement turns toward creation.

The children and adults collect treasures for their own art making.

Sand from the sandbox, extra shells and glass beads, crinkled paper,
dried seed pods, twigs and leaves from the playground, string, canvases,
pots of paint, and plenty of glue.

The children dive in with gusto. They start by exploring the materials. Running their fingers through the sand, shaking the seed pods like maracas.

Serious focus and contemplation punctuated with laughter.

Before long, they’re collaborating on how to create art pieces.

Soon, a challenge emerges: how to make the sand stick to the canvas? This becomes a group problem-solving activity.

“How can we make the sand stick on the canvas?” Sanchez wonders, his hands covered with gloves as this is how he prefers to engage with the sticky wet texture.

This kicks off earnest experimentation and engineering that lasts for many encounters. The children try dabbing wet paint and sprinkling sand (it falls off easily when dry). Then the children try smearing glue (it’s too thick alone and the sand disappears).

Working together the children theorise, and test, and eventually discover that mixing paint with glue makes a sticky coloured paste that holds the sand and objects firmly once it dries.

“Look, it stays!” Violet cheers, shaking a test patch and grinning when the sand doesn’t all cascade off.

This moment isn’t just technical, it is relational and affirming.

In working together to solve the challenge the children’s agency, curiosity, and collaboration is central.

With the challenge conquered, paint and glue is applied thoughtfully to canvases. Into these wet surfaces go found objects and materials.

Dervla carefully presses smooth glass beads into sandy glue, creating a path across the artwork, while Sayon plunks a handful of sand in one corner and spreads it out like a sandy beach.

Ayra is very deliberate, placing a single shell in the centre of the canvas and encircling it with drips of blue glue-paint, saying it is “an island in the ocean.”

Throughout the activity, the group hums with a gentle cacophony of sounds and descriptive language.

Suz continues to narrate what is happening, “I’m putting three shells on the left side next to your canvas, Dervla.”

At times, the other children narrate their actions too. “I’m adding some green leaves to mine,” says Angus.

“Wow, yours has so many different things on it. It feels bumpy!” Kiya says.

This shared commentary does more than describe. It creates a sense that everyone’s creative process is recognised and valued.

It’s a communal studio where seeing and feeling are intertwined.

The children are active artists, with Dervla's ways of experiencing the art – through touch and sound – shared with her sighted peers who enthusiastically add these to their own repertoires as they narrate textures and invite each other to feel their work.

This isn’t about products, it's about process, presence, and inclusion.

This is anti-ableist, participatory pedagogy in practice.
With children engaging as researchers, artists, and designers,
shaping not just the artwork, but the experience itself.

Here, problem-solving is co-constructed. The challenge of making sand stick becomes a site of agency, creativity, and collaboration. Different sensory preferences (gloves, bare hands, smocks) are all respected. Anti-ableist pedagogy paves the way for transformation of the learning space.

Portrait 6: The Gallery Walk

Once the artworks are all finished, it’s time to share.

We hold a ‘gallery walk’ and the children proudly share their artworks, many children with eyes closed, smiling or giggling as they feel the bumps, ridges, and squishy glued parts on their shared or individual canvases, recounting memories as they go.

Now their artworks invite an audience to experience through touch.

Dervla gently pats the artworks, tapping shells with her fingernails and lightly brushing the sand.

The room is alive with exploration. These artworks, born of multi-sensory processes and deep collaboration, now invite a multi-sensory audience.

Suz’s goal of making visual art more accessible to Dervla blossomed into something larger. An entire group of children discovering new ways to ‘see’ art beyond sight.

Instead of Dervla being sidelined in a sighted world, the world of art and play
was expanded, benefiting all the children with richer, more diverse sensory experiences.

No single mode of perception is privileged. Sight, touch, sound, memory, and imagination all hold value.

Through these experiences, the children conveyed their preferences, ideas, perspectives, and emotions in a multitude of ways.

Dervla showed her preference for certain textures by reaching eagerly for them again and again, and we heard her ideas through how she arranges glass beads on her canvas and uses her hands to follow them.

Sanchez’s decision to use gloves while another child dives in bare-handed, some children preferring a smock while many don't, reflects individual comfort and preference, and each choice was respected.

We see ideas emerging and influencing: the children suggesting a trip to the beach, their bubbling curiosity shaping what happens next.

The children working together to engineer a way to make the sand stick to the artworks.

And the emotions are delightfully unmistakable. Laughter while art making, the awe as the children exclaim over textures in works of art. Moments of joy that speak louder than words.

Throughout, relationships are at the core. The bonds between children and adults, friendships amongst peers, the trust between educators, parents and caregivers, and children. This relationality creates a foundation for flourishing.

The adults are listening with attention and empathy, whether it's listening to a child's play-by-play description, or listening through touch to what a child creates. This trust encourages children to take risks. To touch that unfamiliar sticky glue-paint, or to engage wholeheartedly with a pair of gloves on.

There is an atmosphere of support and collaboration. Adults and children co-creating art, peers helping peers, families and teachers learning from each other.

And underpinning all these scenes is a strong anti-ableist ethic.

At no point is anyone made to feel that their way of experiencing the world is a 'special case.' Instead, each way is simply one valuable way, welcomed and supported.

Dervla's modes of communication (through touch and sound) is as important as vision to her sighted peers.

Using gloves is simply another way to engage in sensory experiences.

A shared joy comes from every child being free to be themselves as they unfold together in the journey of art making.

This final portrait shows art as multi-sensory, relational, and joyful. No single mode of perception is privileged. The gallery walk reaffirms that inclusion is about, and benefits, everyone. Sighted peers revel in tactile exploration, while Dervla's ways of knowing are central and celebrated.

DISCUSSION

The portraits presented in this paper illustrate how anti-ableist pedagogy reshapes early childhood artmaking from a practice of access to one of transformation. Rather than positioning inclusion as a matter of 'adding in' children who might otherwise be excluded, the practices in this playgroup reimagined what counts as art, participation, and pedagogy in the first place.

Portraiture as a Method of Seeing and Listening

The use of portraiture was central to this shift. Karaolis (2020) demonstrates how portraiture resists deficit framings by portraying children's strengths and ways of knowing in richly contextualised vignettes. Similarly, in this study, the portraits show Dervla and her peers not as children to be 'accommodated,' but as active meaning-makers. Like for Karaolis (2020), the narrative form makes clear the subtle, relational moments in which agency and belonging are enacted and joy is shared. Attention is paid to the strengths and capabilities of the children – their 'hundred languages' (Malaguzzi, 1996) – and the new ideas they produce (Waite, 2024).

Travis (2020) argues that portraiture is uniquely suited to inclusive and justice-oriented pedagogies because of the emphasis on highlighting the 'goodness' in human interaction. The dignity, resilience, and creativity that are too often overlooked. The portraits here illustrate precisely that goodness. Laughter at paint splatters, the thrill of tactile discovery, the seriousness of collaborative problem-solving, the joy of sharing art with eyes closed. These are not marginal details; they are the very substance of democratic pedagogy. Tuck (2009) presents this as 'desire-based' research, an approach that frames marginalised people in a position of strength rather than deficit.

Participation as Relational, Not Individual

The findings of this study contribute to our understandings of participation in early childhood education. Participation is often imagined as an individual right or a matter of access to activities. Lundy's (2007) model offers a vital corrective, emphasising that participation requires space, voice, audience, and influence. In these portraits, all four elements are vividly present, but always interpreted through a relational, anti-ableist lens.

Space was reconfigured through sensory-rich environments. Fingerpainting with tactile narration, a touchable gallery, an open beach, a collaborative studio and through relationships.

Voice was recognised in laughter, gesture, tactile exploration, verbal exclamations, and material arrangements, each affirmed as valid and powerful.

Audience was enacted not only by adults but also by peers, who listened, mirrored, and responded to one another's contributions.

Influence was evident in curriculum shifts driven by children's ideas, from the gallery to the beach excursion, from the problem of sand sticking to the innovation of 'glue-paint.'

Together, these elements show us how meaningful, relational enactment of participation can unfold within the moment through anti-ableist pedagogy. Through creating a shared space where every way of being and doing is welcomed, where 'visual' art is multi-sensory, relational, and joyful. In doing so, this research aligns with the importance of ensuring genuine, not tokenistic, child participation (Hart, 1992, 2008; Shier, 2019).

Anti-ableism as Transformation and Joy

Anti-ableist pedagogy was not about what needed to be changed for Dervla but a reimagining of practice that benefitted all children. In the gallery experience, the usual hierarchies were suspended as sighted children found joy in tactile exploration and Dervla's ways of knowing were celebrated as central. In the studio, the problem of making sand stick became a collaborative inquiry where different sensory preferences were all affirmed.

Moments of joy within this process – the laughter, smiles, the delight of running fingers over textures, the awe of discovery – are not incidental. Joy itself can be understood as an anti-ableist ethic as it emerges through interactions. Joy counters damaging deficit framings that far too often cast disabled children as 'burdensome', 'tragic', or 'pitiable'. Instead, joy and relational flourishing reveal what becomes possible when pedagogy begins from inclusion. A process of reshaping the pedagogical space so that all forms of expression and engagement are welcomed and valued. Anti-ableist pedagogy ensures that diversity is never considered a 'deficit' or 'deviation' but a generative and valued starting point.

Reimagining Art Beyond Sight

Finally, these portraits contribute to broader debates about the role of the arts in early childhood education. Visual art has historically been defined by sight. Yet here, art was textured, audible, relational, and multimodal. This echoes Malaguzzi's (1996) beautiful framing of 'a hundred languages,' and that no single modality should be privileged.

By making visual art 'visible' beyond sight, the playgroup expanded what art could mean for everyone. This inclusive and anti-ableist approach to participation transformed into an inclusive pedagogy where joy, creativity, and meaning making were shared by all.

Conclusion

Making visual art 'visible' beyond sight is not about adapting for one child, but about reimagining art as multimodal, relational, and inclusive. The portraits presented in this paper show how anti-ableist pedagogy, grounded in children's voices, creates spaces of joy, agency, and belonging.

Inclusive arts practice is therefore not an 'add-on,' but a redefinition of pedagogy itself. When children's ways of knowing are recognised as valid and influential, participation becomes genuinely democratic. In this way, art becomes not only a medium of creativity, but also a practice of justice, dignity, joy, and flourishing.

To conclude, we offer some provocations for educators, researchers, and teacher-educators to take forward in reflecting on this paper and the possibilities for practice:

What might it look like to reimagine visual arts in your setting through a multi-sensory lens?

How do you create space for children to influence the direction of your curriculum?

When does the space allow you to listen to children and not just to their spoken words?

Where are the places and practices in your environment that could be reshaped to welcome different ways of seeing, being, and expressing?

Visual arts in early childhood are not just about learning techniques or producing objects, they are about becoming. About connecting to self, to community, and to culture in ways that honour every child's language of expression.

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