

Children's perceptions of beauty

My research into children's notions of beauty centres on 18 semi-structured interviews with nine groups of children from two schools, carried out between September 2012 and March 2013. The first ten interviews took place at a school in London and involved 28 children aged 10-11, while the remaining eight interviews took place at a school in Surrey and involved 23 children aged 9-10. Prior to their first group interview, children were asked to find and bring to school images that represented their ideas of beauty; before their second interview, they were loaned cameras and asked to take photographs that represented their ideas of beauty. During the interviews children took turns to describe, analyse and reflect upon the images they had found and photographed, to ask each other questions about them and to respond to questions about their broader perceptions and understandings of beauty. Children were interviewed in groups of five or six; the interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and were recorded and transcribed for analysis. In total the 51 children participating in the research found or photographed more than 500 images and chose over 100 examples to share during the interviews, the transcripts of which totaled almost 120,000 words.

The following pages of this document feature a selection of illustrated extracts from interview transcripts. Each extract is designed to accompany one of four audio recordings of the interviews, lasting between five and ten minutes, and available at the following locations.

Part 1 - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1u8fiZiryRg&feature=youtu.be>

Part 2 - <http://youtu.be/1rQeNYaXBjw>

Part 3 - <http://youtu.be/mjY8w9ckBOQ>

Part 4 - <http://youtu.be/ZYnwXwmRltk>

Excerpts from interviews with children aged 9-11 years in two schools

Part 1 School A, London

Excerpt 1

Interview 1

20th September 2012

RW - We're going to start with this one of the ways over here. Ilham, would you like to say why you think it's beautiful?



I - I think it's beautiful because of the colours - because there is green and then there's pink and then there's blue. And when I was there it was the first time I ever saw pink waves and I thought it was really beautiful.

RW - Did you say when you were there? So tell me how you got this photograph.

I - I went to Egypt and on a beach and when we came there was nobody there and so we took a picture of it and it was really beautiful.

S - You actually went there? I thought you just took it from the computer!

I - The others were from the computer but this is real.

RW - That's interesting because I looked at these images this morning and I thought Wow, these are really great images but like you, Sara I thought Ilham had got them from the computer - but I am amazed to hear...

RW - Was it you or was it someone in your family who took a photo and how do you feel when you look at this photograph?

I - I feel like I'm on a beach.

RW - Good what else?

I - I feel like the water was just on me - it feels like I can feel the water running through my hands.

RW - You have a memory of being there. Now who would like to ask...

Excerpt 2

Interview 2

27th September 2012

RW - Ammar, why do you think your image is beautiful?



A - Because it's like a rainbow, it has lots and lots of colours and it just looks so realistic. And there's a bit of water down here that reflects it and makes it look even more nice - beautiful. The background I think is really, really good because when the colours are shining on to the background it just looks like, you know, so real. But if you pick another colour like green, say or yellow, well this is a black background but if you put green or yellow it wouldn't be as good as it is when the background is black. And in the shapes in the blue in the pink and the other blue on the right, on the far right, it's like seeing real people but in the middle it's like I can see this man with a beard and moustache staring out at me, yeah, and on the blue bits it's like knights or something, or guards guarding him - and that's why I think the picture is beautiful.

RW – What did you think of that? That was an amazing description, wasn't it? I'm very impressed because you've obviously thought very carefully about what you want to say. Now everyone, it's your turn to ask A some questions about his image.

Mo – What's your favourite part about the picture?

A - My favourite part about the picture is how they mixed the colours together, because if you put separate colours in separate places it just makes it look so simple - so that's why.

D - Where did you get the picture from?

A - I got it from my dad's album. He printed it a couple of years back and he thought it was really beautiful. When I asked him, yeah, and he gave me it and I was like - he gave me another one first that was definitely not as beautiful as this one - I was like, I want something more colourful and then he searched through his drawers, you know, stuff like that, picked one out and gave it to me and luckily it was this one. Yeah that's where I got it from.

Excerpt 3

Interview 3

4th October 2012

RW - Mustafa, I'm really interested in hearing about this image. Can I hold it up for people so we can all see it at the same time?



Sa – I was wondering whose picture was that...

RW – Let Mu have his say first – he’s going to describe why he chose this picture to represent his idea of beauty. Mustafa.

Mu – First of all, I like the setting and the scenery. I like how it showed how that the flower was blossoming. I also think it represents, like, the process of life. And thinking of the flower and the scenery, it looks very beautiful. And it all connects well together.

RW – I have to say, that was a really excellent description, wasn’t it?

Mu – Thank you.

RW – I wish I had had my pen in my hand when you started speaking so that I could remember the things you just said. You used the word ‘connect’. Can you tell us what you said again?

Mu – The scenery and the flowers and the grass and everything it all connects to make one beautiful picture.

RW – Before we move on to your questions, what do you think about that description? A?

A – He’s saying about like, life, process of life. Ummm... it was a good description. But - and I’m not trying to be rude, or anything, but some of those flowers look like adult flowers.

(voice) – Like they’ve already grown.

A – Yeah.

Mu – I know, so like this - these flowers are, like, the background but it’s mainly about this flower I’m talking about. ‘Cause like, it started off small and it grows. Like when you start up as a baby you grow into an adult and then... life cycle – and it goes on.

Part 2 School A, London (continued)

Excerpt 4

Interview 4

4th October 2012

RW – Think in your head before you answer and then put your hand up. How do you feel when you see something beautiful? There’s lots of different answers to this, I think. D?



D – I feel – when I look at - when I look at beauty – I feel the atmosphere of - I can feel the atmosphere around it at that picture and I can understand what the emotion of picture is and how the feelings and why that person named it beauty and added to the picture.

RW – Thank you. Breana?



B – When I look at this picture (*her own image*) particularly I see, umm – the real beauty in me because – not all the time I get what I want and I’m not always smiling but I know – in this picture – when I always look at it I’m always smiling because... Sometimes I may be upset and bad things happen but I know when I look at this picture I will always be smiling, no matter what.

RW – That’s a lovely answer, thank you. Teyamo? How do you feel when you see something beautiful?



T – When I see something beautiful I feel like... exactly like... I want to be exactly like her because she’s beautiful.



RW – Yonis?

Y – Every time when I see like – every time when I see something like, beautiful and my picture – it feels like – well – I get this feeling like – I can’t really – like a ticklish feeling inside and – I can’t really explain it – but like, it’s - sometimes - sometimes a tickle in your head for some reason.

RW - A tickle in your head! We’re very nearly finished and it’s nearly home time so I’m going to rush you a little bit, I’m sorry. How do you feel when you see something beautiful?

R – When I see something beautiful I feel like, yeah I wanna take this because it’s beautiful. And this is something that I would like to see every time and this is something that would make me smile.

RW - I'm going to ask Kamau to begin by asking him to describe to us why he took this photograph to represent his idea of beauty.



Ka - I chose - I chose this because, umm - I thought it was beautiful. And, like, it was, like, that - you know that thingy walking place - path - I was sitting here - I think it makes it more beautifuller - and the tree as well - that tiny tree. And the colour, I love the colour. It's not just one whole colour. It's like, you know, mixed. Umm - and - yeah - it's beautiful.

RW - Can I ask where you were when you took the photograph?

Ka - I was on my balcony.

RW - And what time of day was it? Morning or evening or...?

Ka - It was like, in two - at about 2pm.

RW - And would you like to say anything else about the photograph and why it's beautiful - before we ask other people?

Ka – Yes – it’s my favourite and I love the colour green and yellow. Yeah.

RW – Thank you. Who would like to ask Kamau a question or make a comment? And remember, we’re thinking about the beauty of the photograph. B?

B – Well I like it because it sort of shows lightness and darkness. On one side it shows all bright and nice coloured and on the other side it’s all dark and in the middle it’s both – it’s light and dark in the middle where the path is. So that’s why I like it – because it’s like a mixture of lightness and darkness.

RW – Very good, Billy, thank you. Yonis?

Y – (*forcefully*) I disagree with Billy because – all it is, I could take that every time!

Ka – (*playfully*) How dare you?

RW – You could take that any time?

Y – Yep.

(*voice*) – You can’t.

RW – Sorry – I’m really going to stick to the rules today – I really want people to take their turns to speak. Yonis is being brave – ‘cause sometimes you have to be brave to disagree with people – and he’s not being offensive, he’s just trying to express his preference. So you think that you could take this any time? Why?

Y – (*excitable*) Because – I could take that at the middle of the day. It’s that walking down to the shopping. Or I could take this picture – it’s like the same. What’s so beautiful about this? This is green. That’s a tree. And a path.

RW – So you’re saying that we could look out of the window now and we could see a path and a tree and a building?

Y – Yeah. (*Kamau goes to interrupt*)

RW – Listen to people’s comments and then *you* will have the final word. I’m going to ask Kyron to respond to Yonis. Yonis is saying, Hey this is just every day...

Ky – I think that’s a good picture – you could *not* take that any time. If it was at night-time you wouldn’t be able to see the tree. I think it was a *good* time to take it because it reflects the colour and if it was night-time you wouldn’t really, like, see as much.

Y – Half of it’s *shaded*.

Ky – That’s ‘cause of the sun...

V – I disagree with Yonis because where the sunlight is going it looks like as if the leaves are glowing as if they were pieces of gold. And the tree looks really golden as if it was made out of real gold. And the building, it looks like as if it was being protected.

RW – Can you explain what you mean by it looks like it was being protected?

V – Say if someone wanted to – it looks like it's not letting the wind - not letting the wind – it's protecting the tree from the wind.

RW – Oh I *see*...

Part 3

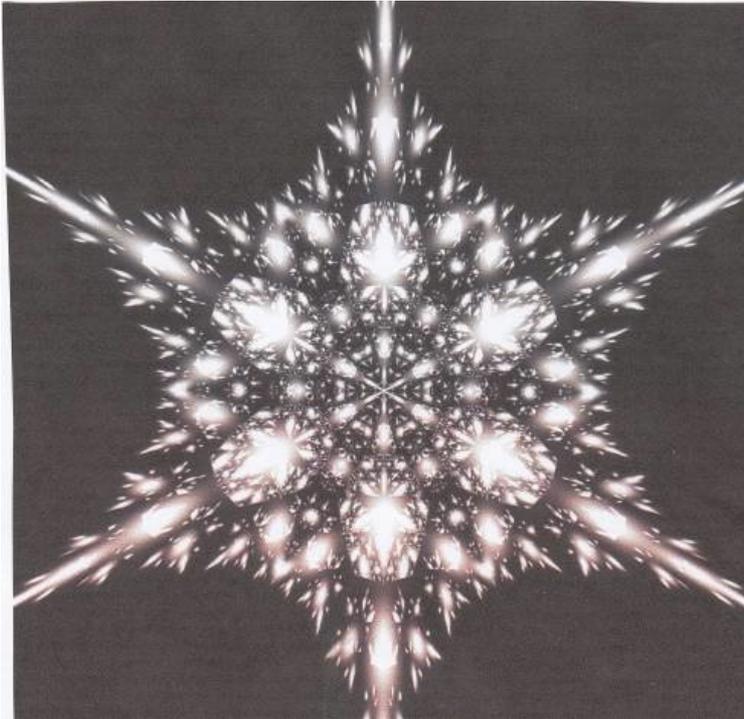
School B, Surrey

Extract 1

Interview 1

31st January 2013

RW – Okay, first of all can you describe the image to us, James?



Ja – It's really patterned and there's - it's just loads of patterns and so *patterned* it, it kind of forms together and makes a shape. Um - it's quite bright in darkness so when it's bright in darkness it really stands out and you can see every little detail. Um - it's, it's just *nice* because you can see, there's lots of patterns and bright patterns and just patterns,

RW - I really like your description, thank you. Megan's been waiting patiently, what would you like to say, Megan?

Me - Can I go to the toilet? (*laughter*)

RW – I guess it had to happen sometime. Of course you can, off you go...um okay, I'm just going to give you a minute... but we've got a question or a comment from Charlie.

Ch – A comment. I don't, er, that's *obviously* not natural, that's obviously done on the computer or something.

? - How?

Ja - How do you know that? It could be the way it's drawn.

Ch – It could be a firework but I really, really, really, really, really, really, really, really doubt that. And if it was a star in the sky, and you looked at it, if you looked at a star in the sky through a telescope, and it looked like that, even a star like the sun, if it looked like that...

RW – Okay, interesting point, we'll come to Ely, we might come back to that point.

EI – I actually don't think it's real because it's complete, exactly symmetrical.

Ja? – But does it *matter* whether it's *real*? We never said it *had* to be real. We said what's beautiful, didn't we?

RW – James is quite right.

Ja - Okay then - the Opera House is man-made, some of *you* thought that was beautiful.



Ch - I didn't say it was beautiful.

RW – Is there an implication here that we want beautiful things to be natural? Because one of the qualities of your image, Charlie, was that it was perfect nature. This (*James's image*) is perfect as well but is it perfect nature or perfect maths?

Several – (perfect) maths.

RW – And does that make you like it a little less, Ely?

EI – No, because it still is really pretty.

RW – Is pretty the same as beautiful?

Several – Um, no.

RW – Ely?

EI – Kind of and kind of not...

Ja – Technically...

RW - Okay James, carry on,

Ja - ...Maddie, you thought the Sydney Opera House was beautiful and now you're saying *this* isn't beautiful because it's man-made.

Ma – I didn't say it wasn't beautiful.

Ja - She didn't say it wasn't beautiful and she didn't say it was man-made.

Ma – No, I haven't even said anything yet.

RW – Is it possible for something man-made to be beautiful?

Several – Yes...

RW - And something natural to be beautiful? But what we're kind of curious about here is whether *this is* natural or whether it is man-made.

Ja? - That is definitely - we all know that is probably man-made.

? – Yeah, it could be a firework, apart from the centre.

Ja? – So, why can't something man-made be beautiful?

Several – It can be.

Ja? – Okay, so why do you say this is a bit *less* beautiful because it's man-made? Explain that.

Ch – I still don't think it's beautiful but it's - it's not because it's not because it's man-made. It's hard to explain.

RW – What's missing from it? Okay - Nell.

Ne – Well, in ICT we're doing stuff like this...

RW – Say that again?

Ne – In ICT we're doing stuff like this...

RW – Oh really? You're creating shapes like this.

Ne - So how do you, that's *kind* of beautiful and it's kind of *not*.

RW - Okay, Charlie?

Ch - I've just got a phrase and then I, and then that's all I've got to say; beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

RW - What does that mean, I don't understand?

? – Everyone knows that.

Ch - If you've got like anything, if you've got a picture of something, like any of the pictures here, it could be beautiful to someone, but to someone it couldn't be. That doesn't make it not beautiful and it doesn't make it beautiful.

RW – Was it true of your picture though? And was it true of the first picture we looked at, where, Ishaque's one, because everyone agreed about the sunset and the silhouette, and everyone agreed about this.



Ch – But maybe the whole of (Class) 6LS

think it's *not* beautiful.

? – A business could come here and say it's...

RW – Is that likely?

Ch – No. But if, if one person, if you've got two people, one person looks at it and the other person does; one says it's beautiful, one person says it *isn't* beautiful...

RW – Go ahead, go ahead.

Ch – Then it doesn't mean that it's not beautiful and it doesn't mean that it *is* beautiful. It's not like, say you've got the Queen and you've got...

RW - Keep going...

Ch - And you've got a random girl picked off the streets, the random girl says it's beautiful and the Queen says it's not, it doesn't mean that it's not beautiful because the Queen is more powerful, it doesn't mean it's not beautiful.

RW – So everyone has sort of equal rights...

Ch – Yeah...

RW - ...when it comes to deciding what's beautiful.

RW - I think we know what we're looking at, don't we? Jasmine, can you describe what we can see?



Jas – Well it's the world because it's like everyone says the world's a small place but actually it's really big and everything lives on earth and everything can survive on earth and it's like the colours blend in and the clouds blend in with the blue ocean and the lands can like see where you are, and stuff.

RW – You've talked about two different things there, you talked about what you understand about the world and you've also talked about the way the world looks from outer space, so both of those things are important to you, are they? Tell us a little bit more about the first things you said, about everything is, everything in the world is...

Jas - ?

RW - It reminded me of something Heather said about living things...thinking about this image and beauty, you chose it because everything...

Jas – lives on it and stuff?...and everything blends in, the ocean, and all of the land, just sort of come together,

RW - Good. Can I ask you how you thought of this picture or how you found it? What you were looking for?

Jas – Well I thought of the idea of earth so I went on the computer and I typed in 'pictures of the world' and then that one, it, like the other ones it just really caught my eye and I thought it looked really nice.

RW - So when, a couple of weeks ago when I asked you to find something beautiful, the idea of the earth came into your head, and then you found the picture. Who would like to ask Jasmine a question about her picture? Heather?

He – Um, did you think of choosing a map or did you just think of a picture taken from space with all the clouds and everything when you thought, when a few weeks ago...?

Jas - Well I definitely thought of just outer space 'cause on a map all, everything's like, if you know what I mean, everything's flat and you can see everything, you can see where places are but when you just look at it from outer space it doesn't have like loads of dots on it, so I think that if you saw it on a map it would sort of spoil it a bit because all of the dots showing where places are and stuff.

RW – It is quite different, isn't it, a map from a photograph of the same thing? That's a really nice description. Ben, what do you think?

Ben - I think it is quite, like, it looks quite peaceful but it's actually not when you get, when you're actually down in earth, from up in space it looks peaceful but in some parts of the earth it's definitely not peaceful!

RW – That's a really interesting comment, can you tell us a bit more?

Ben – Like in big cities it would, it's not peaceful because you can you hear engines, in offices, you can hear like, it's basically the roads that make it and lots of people around talking that make it, that make it the most, like, make it the most noise.

RW – And is it harder to imagine something being beautiful if it's noisy?

Ben – Well, in some bits no and in some parts yes, because you can have like, there could be a shop that you really like and *that* could be beautiful and then you could have all the people and that could *not* be beautiful so...

Part 4 School B, Surrey (continued)

Extract 3 Interview 4 28th February 2013



RW - How would you describe this picture, its not...

An – I'd say it's quite tropical and I like the colours in it, they're not too big and bold, I think it's just quite calm and - what's the word? -calm and peaceful.

RW – As well as beautiful?

An – Yeah.

RW – It's calm, it's peaceful and it's beautiful and Gracie would like to ask a question, or make a comment.

Gra – I think it's like, I think it's like natural, it's nature really, it's just like - not like there's rubbish everywhere, it's just natural, nature, it's *together*, it's beautiful. It's basically, and I really like the way like the trees, it's like a 'V' shape, it looks like they're all, like, it's like a holding hands, if you see it like that, it's like...

? – Oh yeah...

Gra – Everything's like really peaceful and calm, loving and caring, in a way.

? – Water's calm as well.

RW – Would anyone else like to say anything about the photograph because if, we'll come back to some of the words you chose in a minute because I want to ask you about some of those words. Spike.

Spi – I like, I like how it's peaceful and calm but as well I like how, from my instinct, when I saw that picture, I thought 'Oh I like that!' because I can imagine myself climbing up a mountain and falling down a waterfall - almost like you can imagine yourself in it because it's so, you've got a painting in front of you so you can imagine yourself having a blast there, rather than having yourself, like sitting down really bored.

RW – The idea that you can imagine yourself climbing the rocks; is that part of its beauty or is that something different?

Spi – I think just like the texture and the beauty from the artwork in the picture, that makes it like, easier to imagine yourself there because it looks like the real thing.

RW – It looks like the real thing. Bonnie, what do you think?

Ba – ... I like the waterfall, that's my favourite bit about it, I think, 'cause it's not too big and it wouldn't make that much noise, I'd say I'd like that, and it's like a sunny day and the water, it's very calm and everything. You can imagine the wind.

RW – So you can imagine the parts of the picture that we can't see, as well?

Ba – Yeah I can.

RW – Does it make you want to be there? Or not really?

Ba – Kind of.

Em – It does to me. It looks really like sunny and everything, it's really nice.

Bo – I can just imagine behind the camera, so like there's lots of bushes and then like on the TV and then you go through the bushes and then you've got the...

Gra – Portal

Ba - ... and things like that.

RW – You mean you discover this?

Ba – You discover something, you go through the bushes you can't see past and then you just take them out of the way and you can see that... it happens on movies sometimes.

RW – So there are qualities about the picture...

Ba – I like surprises if you know what I mean - it's like going into a football stadium 'cause it's quite, it's like stairs and you walk up and then you can see the whole crowd and the stadium, that's what I really like.

RW – Ah, I see what you mean.

Ba – I like that stuff.

RW – We might come back to that idea in a minute. I'm just going to ask Gracie a couple of things. You described this picture as, you used the word 'loving' and I was quite surprised and interested. Could you explain what you mean by this, the sense of loving?

Gra – Well, it's quite hard to like, explain, but it's basically everything's like in *order*, it's loving, everything's like basically got a partner, 'cause like, that's got that, that one's got like the nature bits are like around here, that's got that, the sky's got the - that, so basically they're all

joined together like it's a family of green, a team, it's like it's working together, basically, to run this, to make it beautiful.

Extract 4

Interview 6

14th March 2013

RW - We've got another ten minutes and I'm going to ask you a couple of more questions. So, a tricky one first, how do you know when something is beautiful?

Boy? - ...? ugly.

Ja? – Oh wait, no,

RW – How do you know when something is beautiful?

Boy? – When it's light colours,

RW – Jasmine?

Ja – When you look at it twice and you just, you don't think 'Oh gosh that's just sad,' or 'That's just stupid'; you think, 'Oh that looks really nice,' you just...

Ben - You don't think any bad thoughts about it.

RW – You look at it twice, Ben – you...?

Ben - ...Don't think any bad thoughts about it.

RW – When you look at something twice or you don't think any bad thoughts about it, um, Bonnie?

Bo – What Ben and Jasmine said, mixed together?

RW – Nice answer. How do we know when something is beautiful? Heather?

He – No clue.

RW – Okay. Next question. How do you feel when something is beautiful?

Al? – That's a hard one.

RW – Bonnie?

Bo – Warm.

RW – Warm. Jasmine?

Ja – Happy and you get like, like Bonnie said you get like a warm feeling, you don't feel like you're, you're like, you don't feel like you're just...

Bo -- When I see a beautiful picture I don't feel like I'm alone, though? It might be weird but I don't feel like I'm alone, I see a beautiful picture, I don't think 'I'm alone', I think I'm like, with someone and I know they're there.

Extract 5

Interview 8

28th March 2013

RW - OK – We're going to follow the same pattern as before. I'm going to ask Spike to describe his image to us – and then I'm going to ask him to describe why he thinks it's beautiful – and then I'm going to see if you have questions for Spike. So Spike, it's your turn.



Spike - Describing? It is a smiley face in the dirt.

RW – Thank you. Can you describe to us why it's beautiful?

Sp – 'Cause of it reminds me of like happy times and things. Things like that, nice memories, smells.

RW – Tell me more.

Sp – As in like - when you like, if there was a sad face, you think of, normally, or not normally, I don't know, you'd, well I think you'd think of something sad. Then you see like a happy face, you think of something happy. And it's cool because it's in the dirt. That makes it beautiful.

RW – Did you say, that makes it beautiful because it's in the dirt? Can you explain what you mean, why does it make it beautiful because it's in the dirt?

Sp – ‘Cause - it’s ironic. ‘Cause dirt’s not described as beautiful. Regularly.

RW – What do you mean by ironic?

Sp – Ironic basically meaning opposite... ‘cause if you had dirt you wouldn’t think of it as like, pretty or beautiful, you’d think of it as worthless, something you can just get on the floor. But then like, you can almost use the dirt, in a way, to make things beautiful.

RW – Thank you Spike, that’s really interesting. Does anyone have a question for Spike? Gracie.

Gra – When you, um, said it, do you basically mean, I know you love drawing and doodling - so basically do you mean it’s a work of art?

Sp – Yyyy... it’s almost like a natural work of art because there’s, because art’s like different, because all art’s beautiful *in a way*, but like um, but I just think natural, because it’s all outside, rather than all cramped up on a piece of paper, when it’s outside you can just make it as big as you want, small as you want, detailed as you want, but then as well that just makes it more calm, rather than all busy and things, it makes it like more beautiful.

Gra – Yep, that’s really good.

End