Making & Believing

An Early Years action research project

led by Take Art in partnership with Derby Theatre and Surrey Arts,

funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation

Dr Susan Young

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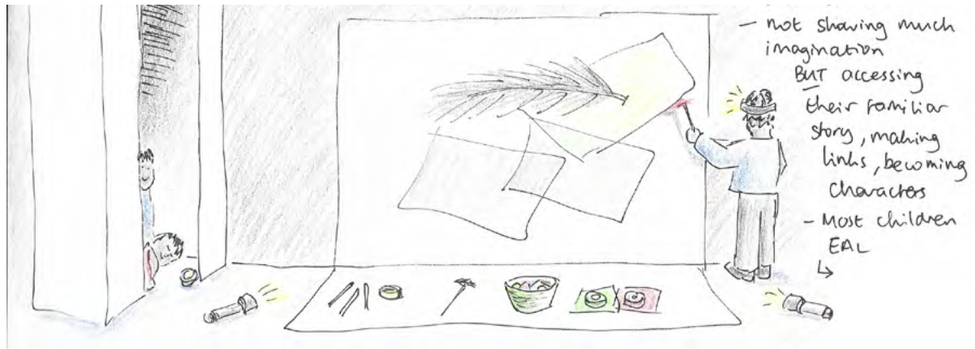

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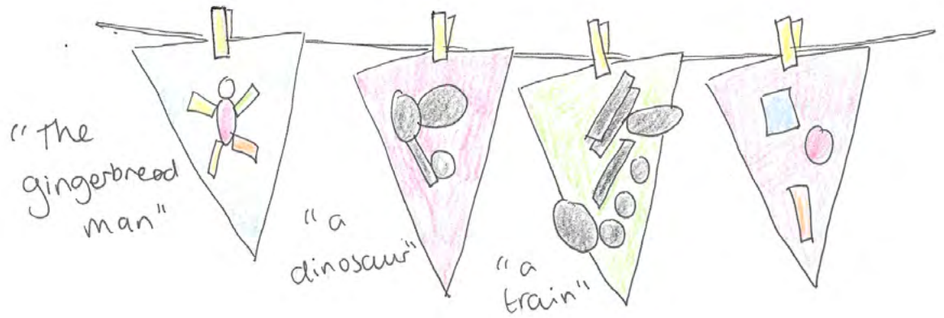

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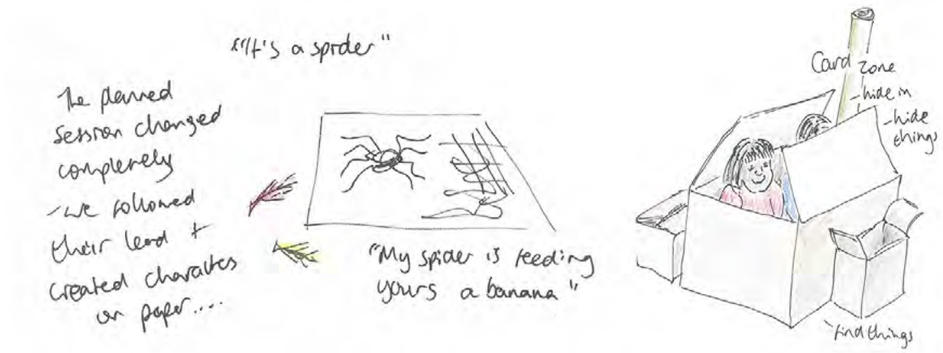


INTRODUCTION

This report concludes the Making & Believing Project which ran from July 2021 to July 2023. The project had two interconnecting strands. It placed pairs of artists to work in early childhood settings for placements of 10 weeks, in three locations: Derby, Surrey and Somerset. It also arranged for short tours of theatre and dance performances for young children to visit early years settings and theatre venues in the same locations.

This project continued a series of projects initiated by Take Art, which have aimed to develop and embed creative and reflective practice in early childhood education. These projects bring together artists, educators, arts organisations, researchers, and cultural centres with the aim of raising the quality of education for young children through creative experiences.

The project was motivated by the belief that the arts have a special educational role due to their capacity to develop imagination, curiosity and possibility thinking. There is a pressing need to challenge the current trends in early childhood education and promote critical and creative thinking as the heart of learning.

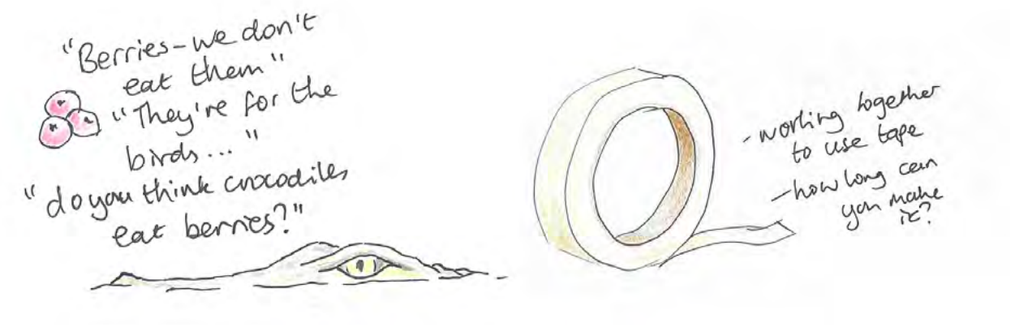
Take Art and the partner organisations of Derby Theatre and Surrey Arts recognise that all children have a right to high quality arts and culture in their lives and are committed to enabling this right. The tours of theatre and dance performances were integrated into the project and fulfilled that commitment.

A secondary purpose was to create a collaboration between three arts organisations: Take Art Somerset, Derby Theatre and Surrey Arts. Take Art has a strong background in early childhood arts and this current project built on that legacy, disseminating expertise to the partner organisations.

This final report, drawing on its action research approach, aims to go beyond describing what happened or attempting to evaluate impact. It aims to make visible the creative and democratic processes of learning that can then lead to renewed motivation and action within both the arts and cultural and education sectors.

The achievements of the project were:

- Providing enriched creative and play-based experiences for young children in 20 settings across Derby City and Somerset and Surrey counties
- Providing a programme of theatre and dance performances that visited early childhood settings in situ
- Developing the expertise of early years practitioners for integrated, creative practice
- Developing the expertise of a core team of artists to work in early years education
- Supporting the development of new participatory programming within arts organisations



SUMMARY

Children make-believing, artists belief-making

- The Making & Believing project combined placements of creative artists in 20 early childhood settings with performance tours that visited 67 settings and 16 theatre venues. The project started at a difficult time for the early childhood sector as it was emerging from the pandemic. The earliest stage of the project was affected by Covid restrictions with delayed starts and some initial reduction of activity.

- The project was based on an enquiry-based approach to learning that allowed both children and adults (artists and setting staff) to think in a creative and critical way. The adults documented the children's participations and reflected together to increase their understanding of children's creative learning and to forward plan.

- The children across all the settings were provided with richly imaginative, participatory creative play activities provided by two artists visiting weekly during one term. The artists evolved some distinctive, original approaches to creative practice, for example: expansive, large-scale play; narrative play in super-diverse settings; and expressive time-based play in music, dance, and drama.

- The children gained from opportunities to experience theatre and dance performances. In some settings and in different ways, the performances connected with the artists' placements.

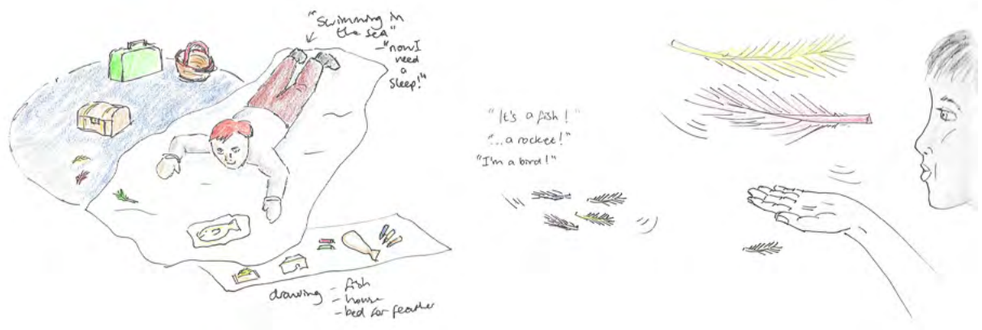
- In the current education policy context, play for its own sake, to develop creativity and imagination, is being diverted into play for pre-determined, formal learning outcomes. Creativity has slipped from the educational agenda in the last decade or more. Therefore, at the present time, reminding staff in settings how to provide for and engage children in open-ended, artistic play has educational importance.

- The early years settings which hosted the placements varied in the extent to which they could provide a conducive context for the work. Where there was an existing culture of valuing play, and a flexible approach to practice, the artists could integrate their work successfully and the work had the potential to influence practice for the longer term.

- Three partners came together in this project. Take Art was the initiating, lead organisation drawing on long term experience to support the development of the two other organisations, Surrey Arts and Derby Theatre. Both partner organisations appointed a key person to lead and manage the project within their locality. They gained experience of the early years education sector and increased their understanding of developing creative work in early childhood educational settings. Building on this project, Derby Theatre are expanding their early years activity into new ventures.

- The project highlighted the fact that there is a shortage of artists with experience of working in creative play with young children. Take Art has a long history of developing creative arts projects in the early years and has developed a small cohort of artists in its Somerset locality with this experience. The recruitment of suitable artists in Surrey and Derby proved more of a challenge. The project identified and supported the professional development needs of the artists and, for the longer term, has also highlighted the need for workforce development. The first stages of the project focused on the artists developing their own understanding of children's play and the different models of pedagogy which might be appropriate.

- The action research process threaded through the whole project. All the artists documented the activity of children, met with staff to reflect, and then participated in regular seminars. The action research has arrived at a number of key themes to consolidate the learning from this project and to inform future work.



THE CHILDREN

The Lion-Bird

The artists have brought small, coloured feathers and clay to the nursery and are outside on a warm summer morning. One girl holds up two yellow feathers, one in each hand, showing them to the artist, seated by her on the ground.

"Two yellow feathers" says the artist. *"What could it be?"*

The girl pauses. *"It might be a lion"* she replies. She starts to gather up yellow feathers and rolls a ball of clay in her two hands. Then she presses feathers into the clay to make her lion. When the lion is nearly complete, another girl, by accident, sits on it and squashes it.

The first girl looks at her flattened lion and looks up at the artist. She pauses.

"It might be a bird" says the girl.
"A lion-bird" says the artist.
"A lion-bird" repeats the girl, picking it up. She runs away across the grass, swooping and dipping the lion-bird.

What does this small incident capture? First the artists have brought in simple materials - clay, feathers, balls of wool, willow sticks - that can become many things. The artist responded to the girl when she showed her two feathers by simply affirming what she was holding – two yellow feathers. Then she asked *"what could it be?"*, inviting her to think of possibilities. The artist then facilitates the lion-making by finding a few more yellow feathers but leaves the girl to continue making since it is clear that she is motivated and engaged. The artist is busy with other children but keeps her eye on the progress of the feathered lion.

She notices the incident when another girl sits on the lion, but, rather than respond immediately, waits and watches to see how the girl reacts to the squashed model. There is a quiet moment. A pause. Then the girl looks up and suggests it's a bird and the artist judges the moment to offer a suggestion – a lion-bird, a hybrid. The lion is not spoiled by being squashed but transformed. What might have been an incident

of upset and anger at her friend sitting on the lion, becomes a compromise, a new possibility. The lion-bird comes to life as it flies across the grass.

This small incident illustrates the key themes that underpinned the Making & Believing project:

- A belief in the value of creativity and children's creative abilities, to think of possibilities
- The importance of creative relationships in which attentive, listening adults meet children in dialogue
- The importance of creative environments that are material, embodied, social and emotional
- And the fostering of positive dispositions, for imagination, holistic learning, and resolution of social situations

Case studies

In the first placements, artists were asked to identify 4 children to be case studies. The aim was to focus the artists' attention on the children's engagement with their activities and to encourage depth rather than breadth of observations. To select 4 children allows for the fact that children, for all kinds of reasons, may not attend regularly, and so from an original 4 children, at least 2 can be predicted to attend consistently.

The artists collated their case study information on a shared platform and later presented them at the project seminars. By focussing on a few children and discussing in the reflective sessions, the artists could increase their understanding of children's creative processes. The case studies revealed the dynamic interplay of imagination, emotions, pretence and everyday knowledge as the children created and conveyed meaning via different modes – spoken language, gestures, signs and symbols, sounds and embodied movement.

Children's funds of knowledge

Children play with familiar themes from their lives (Hill & Wood, 2019). Play offers child-initiated situations in which children can make decisions about what knowledge is important for them, what they want and need to learn and what directions their activities should take. Practitioners in the settings knew the children well and could support the artists in looking below the surface of an activity. For example, a practitioner told the artists that one girl had started a majorettes activity outside of school and was playing with a flag (made of canes and fabric) in majorettes style.

Choice and agency

The opportunities to play enabled the children to make meaningful choices and be self-determining. They were invited to contribute ideas from which the artists could

generate activity with them, in playful dialogue. In this way the artists' activities enabled each child to find their own voice and identity, to explore their own capabilities and make autonomous choices, but at the same time, start to learn how to accommodate their choices to others.

Holistic learning

Multimodality – the idea that meaning is engendered through all modes of engagement in concert – was supported by placing artists with different art forms in the same setting to work together. Thus, for example, the visual artist and musician fostered play forms that brought together sound, movement and visuals, each reinforcing and enhancing the other.

Social and emotional development

In this period immediately after pandemic there has been concern for the mental health of children and for their ability to adapt to the social demands of participating in nursery education. At one setting, early in the project, one boy was afraid to go outside, but the excitement of the other children playing with a huge stretch of flapping fabric enticed him out of the security of the indoor space. The artists gently coaxed him to join in, recognising that for him even to venture outside, represented an important achievement.

The freedom to play enabled children to express what was important to them, at their own time, in their own way. The children could learn to self-regulate because the adults were attentive and, if necessary, subtly guiding and re-directing. Wet clay was smeared all over hands and faces, an absorbing activity for those who initiated it, yet there were subtle checks and re-directions being made by the attentive adults to ensure it was a comfortable and positive playful, emotional experience for all children. The exuberance of some children who enjoyed smearing and pasting clay did not suit all the children gathering around the activity.

Physical development

That mind and body act as one in a process of enactive cognition is now well understood and many of the activities allowed for active bodily movement, particularly when artists worked outside. The dancers in the team, in particular, could foster the inclusion of bodily movement in creative play.

Narrative expressions

By allowing children to develop their own narrative expressions they could experiment with control and agency. This enabled them to explore physical and emotional risk through the safe parameters of play. I noticed that the artists were often willing

– perhaps more so than setting staff - to allow the children to act out narratives in which they, the children, could assume forms of agency. For example, one artist allowed himself to be taped up and hobbled with masking tape, led away to prison and "locked up". Activities that took place out of doors, offering more open space, often allowed for expansive narratives to evolve, of castles, prisons, dinosaurs, and giant spider webs.

Pretence

Pretence has an important function from the perspective of play as a child-led activity. The artists, for example, had brought corks into a setting. One child put a cork to sleep, in a tiny bed. To pretend and re-enact, and being able to follow their own ideas, may be emotionally soothing and reassuring.

Inclusion and fostering difference

Because the artists had no definite expectations of an outcome from their activities and no learning targets, the activities were open-ended and processual. Therefore, including all children was unproblematic. Every child could participate in their own way. The artists did not know which children had special needs that had to be considered and accommodated.

The artists approached all children as being capable of having ideas, making meanings, and participating. The artists working with the children gave the practitioners an opportunity to step back and observe the children in different types of activity with different adults. Practitioners saw children they did not usually expect, in their words, to *"be interested", "work with others"* or to be *"talkative"* and to become these through the artistic activities. The children's engagement could surprise the practitioners who commented on the ways in which the playful, creative activities enabled children to show what they could do – rather than confirm what they could not yet do.

Early Years Practitioner: *"The biggest eye-opener for me has been the SEND children and how they engage. I think we need to take the pressure off".*

Early Years Practitioner: *"We have children who wouldn't normally choose to join with those kinds of activities. It was so nice to see them engaging. I saw a different side to D."*

Early Years Practitioner: *"He can come across as potentially disruptive, but when you observe him carefully, you see that he is not".*

Children, for example, who had been identified according to formal assessment criteria as having language delay might be heard communicating vocally and verbally with artists in the midst of a playful activity, which had motivated them to communicate. For example, one child had been identified as non-verbal. On hearing about that assessment, the artist commented, *"that's interesting, because he said 'plop, plop' lots*

of times when we were playing together". The speech and language specialist replied, *"It goes against what we have been taught (with respect to language delay) and it fascinates me"*. The Early Years Practitioner added, *"we expect verbal, verbal all the time. K and M don't expect it and so the children talk to them."*

Two-year-olds

Many of the settings catered for 2-year-olds. How the youngest children were provided for varied across different settings. In settings with larger numbers of children and more staff, the 2-year-olds could be provided with a separate area or separate room. Some smaller settings created certain times when the youngest children could be separated from the older children for some tailored input. In other, smaller settings the 2-year-olds were integrated with older children all the time.

SY Observation Notes: *"I notice the 2-year-olds tend to drift around the margins of activities and not settle. They don't know how to enter into play activities, they need help with that."*

Artist: *"At the start of the morning, we could work with the 2-year-olds, and cater for what they needed because when the older children came, they'd push them out of the way – well, not literally, but you know what I mean."*

In retrospect, the initial training of artists might have benefitted from greater awareness of age differences and how to accommodate them.

The need for creativity

"The radical and critical imagination is under assault in most neoliberal societies because it poses a threat, as does the idea that the mission of education should have something to do with creating critically thoughtful, engaged young people who have a sense of their own agency and integrity, and the possibility to really believe they can make a difference in the world."

(Giroux, 2015)

Creativity in education enjoyed an active period during the years 2000 to 2014, which coincided with government sponsored initiatives to foster creativity in education. Funded organisations such as Creative Partnerships and Creativity, Culture and Education made resources for innovation and experiment available to schools, including early childhood settings. Though never lavish, these resources enabled some educational settings, particularly those which had been involved directly in project and development work, to make significant changes in curriculum and pedagogy.

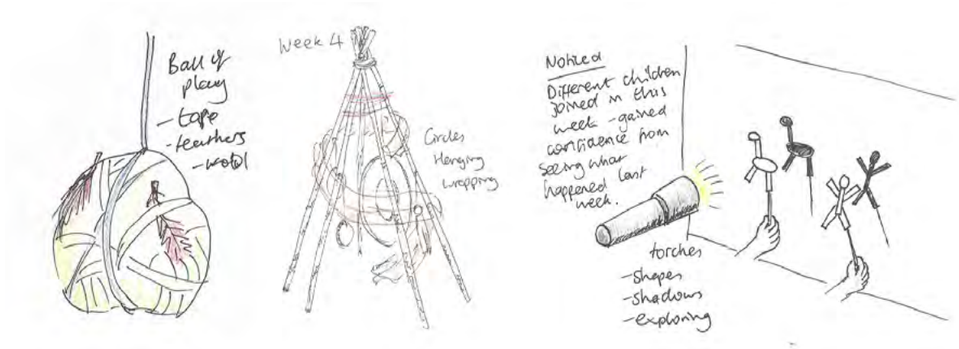
In more recent years there has been a noticeable decline, and this is a direct result of the marked policy shift in education away from creativity to a knowledge and skills based curriculum. Arts Council England have an active 10 year strategy from 2020-30 *"Let's Create"* and are currently delegating funds to partners with expertise in distributing funds to organisations working within education. However, as many are warning, unless education policy, curriculum directives and inspection systems become more orientated to creative learning, the strategy may only have minimal impact on education practice (see e.g. Parker, Thomsen & Berry, 2022).

As a consequence of changes in educational priority, in recent years projects focussed on developing creativity in early years education have been few and far between. Organisations with an established programme of early childhood arts and theatre work have managed to continue by adapting and accessing different sources of funding. For example, the Birmingham project Moonbeams based on Reggio pedagogy has been able to create some continuity of its work over the last 20 years by accessing different sources of funding (Arts Connect, 2023).

The current situation is, however, bleak. A House of Lords report of 2022-23 At Risk: Our Creative Future, while minimal in its discussion of education and mainly focussing on creative industries in the UK, nevertheless represents the current mood and situation – and calls for urgent change. In the international arena, a current Future of Jobs Report (2023) from The World Economic Forum has listed the 10 key skills for the future and highlights the importance of creativity, innovation, critical thinking, collaboration, and interpersonal skills that children will need for their futures.

There are many academics and educators arguing that in the face of current crises, we need pedagogy that encourages the development of creative thinking, curiosity and inventive confidence, alongside the development of interpersonal skills such as empathy, perspective taking and skills in dialogue and arriving at consensus and compromise (Young, forthcoming). The practical experiences offered by the Making & Believing project promoted children's skills in all these areas. The theatre and dance performances in particular modelled and stimulated empathy and dialogue and how to understand and accommodate the needs and feelings of others, and to find solutions.

There is, then, a stark mismatch between calls from many directions, from academics and education specialists, the Arts council, reports from international forums, for education to develop children's abilities to think creatively and flexibly - and current government policy in the UK. Education policy, however, shows no sign of budging. If anything, it is becoming even more entrenched in its principles of knowledge acquisition and core skills in literacy and numeracy and a dominant "school readiness" agenda for early childhood education, with the creative subjects relegated to the margins.



THE ARTISTS

Artist's observation notes: *"We had laid out the egg shakers in different ways on the carpet area and immediately some children came and joined us. Seeing so many eggs (we had about 60-70 egg shakers), they started collecting them and put them in front of them almost as if to guard them. Some children were even sitting on the eggs. Some wrote with the eggs into the air. When I started dropping the eggs onto the carpet and making some sounds the children copied me."*

"When we got the beanbags out, some of the children put their eggs to sleep on the beanbags. One boy collected 1 egg at a time and carried it over in 'his' corner which was further away from the rest of the children, where he put all of the eggs he collected. S. immediately vocalised her playing with the eggs and putting them into different places."

"Some of the schemas emerged, trajectory, transporting, positioning – the children carried the eggs to different locations, they threw them to the ground, and they put them into long lines on top of the beanbags."

Pre and post interviews with artists

The initial interview for the recruitment of artists included questions that were designed to be part of an initial pre-project interview. All artists were interviewed at the conclusion of the project according to a common schedule of semi-structured questions and were invited to give any additional feedback. This process contributed to identifying:

- Changes in the artists' knowledge, understanding and attitude towards children's creativity
- Changes in the artists' practical/artistic skills
- Changes in the artists' pedagogical skills

The concluding interviews also contributed to some general feedback about the current context in early childhood education, the factors that contributed or inhibited successful working in the settings and structural or organisational issues related to overall project design.

Values

Artists were asked, what is your definition of creativity in young children?

Creativity can be almost impossible to define, and the artists offered widely varying accounts of what they understood it to be, and how that understanding impacted on their work. In their practice and in how they spoke about the children's participation, all the artists demonstrated that they valued the children's playful engagement with materials and their ideas. Some could articulate an understanding of creativity as being about divergent thinking, having unexpected ideas, problem solving and story-making.

The least experienced at working in an open-ended, processual way, needed to discuss their own practice and how they had evolved a child-centred approach. Being able to decentre and notice, describe, and discuss the children's creativity is the follow-on stage, and some artists needed time and experience to arrive at that stage.

Artists' Learning

"I had to learn to let the outcome go and be very fluid – to be flexible and respond. I had to learn to see what the children are making."

(Artist final interview)

The artists had widely varying professional and qualification backgrounds. Some began with considerable prior experience of working in early years education on creative projects and had master's level qualifications in early childhood education and arts. Some had less experience of working in early childhood education arts projects.

For some, their experience of early childhood had consisted of running private sessions. Some were very interested in and committed to the idea of action research, of documentation and reflection in practice. Some were less 'signed up' to that approach.

Thus, the artists had divergent needs for professional development, and these were difficult to cater for. It had been assumed, in advance of the project start, that the artists recruited would have a knowledge of how to foster children's creativity, how to observe, document, review and forward plan. It became evident as the project started that not all had this experience (see later section on recruitment challenges).

Although there was a one day seminar before the project began, with hindsight, a longer professional development period might have been included. The greatest need on the part of the artists was to understand the processes of young children's play and how to connect, pedagogically, with their play.

The learning seminars

The seminar days were modelled on similar projects (e.g. 5X5X5=Creativity, see Fawcett & Hay, 2004) which apply the principles of Reggio Emilia. These projects incorporated reflective practice days in which information and training was blended with presentations by the artists. Gina Westbrook who had designed the Making & Believing project is knowledgeable about Reggio Emilia practice and had followed the work of the 5X5X5 team closely. Making & Believing continued a tradition of practice developed in a lineage of prior projects.

Before the placements began, there was only one day in which to bring the artists together, get to know their backgrounds and experience, to introduce them to the project aims and purposes and begin to work with their collaborative partner. The geographic distances meant that bringing everyone together for a seminar day was logistically difficult, with long journeys for some.

A longer introduction to the project over 2 days or even 3 days would have been helpful (the Birmingham based Moonbeams, project, for example, provided a 3 day introductory course for all participating artists). Prior projects run by Take Art have included more frequent but shorter reflection 'get togethers' – but this was not practically possible with this project. The learning seminars became a more formal occasion for reporting on the prior period and for project management, rather than an opportunity for open-ended, exploratory discussion.

One occasion when, logistically, a learning seminar was not possible, the project researcher visited each project team individually and this provided an opportunity for more in-depth discussions in the informality of cafes and coffee shops. Artists need time and conducive opportunities to reflect, narrate their practice, frame their own interpretations of it, and forge their personal pedagogical principles.

Process and product

As is often discussed, creative practice in education, particularly in the early years, should emphasise process over product (Sandbrook & Churchill, 2018). A product may arise from the process, but the product is not anticipated or predesigned in advance. Children need to be given the opportunity to initiate and generate their own ideas. However, artists who joined the project from a background of providing private, fee-paying sessions for young children were often tied to a product focus. For these artists an important shift in understanding their role had to take place and one that was not always easy to make.

The project was not initially framed by an explicit philosophy or pedagogical model. Prior Take Art projects had broadly adopted Reggio principles but a change in personnel at Take Art meant that continuity with this tradition was interrupted. At the start of the project the artists needed a framework, complete with language and concepts, for thinking about what the children are doing, and the aims and intentions of their role. They had an intuitive sense of artistic activity, but without a framework, some were

unclear how to work in the settings.

The early seminar explained documentation and reflective practice and provided a number of approaches which might be applied to young children's creativity – as a set of options, not as a prescribed approach. The artists adopted these, some more than others. Those with more experience of working within similar projects and/or a stronger academic background in education, tended to adopt a more interpretive approach to the work and to be more confident in identifying how to forward plan and build.

This points to the need for workforce training and a need for the artists to have not only expertise in their art form, but also expertise in early childhood education. By the final seminar all the artists were able to present and communicate their work using a more assured common language to describe and explain the children's engagement.

The need for pedagogy

Good ideas for resources and modelling play-based approaches is not enough (Arnott & Duncan, 2019). Unless there is an underpinning theory behind the activities, they can remain static, at the level of activity ideas rather than purposeful (ibid). This is where action research, that promotes reflection and personalised enquiry is effective, particularly when it incorporates the pedagogical strategies of documentation and reflection.

Each placement included a meeting at the end of the morning between artists and setting staff to review photos, any video footage, observation notes and to discuss what had happened and forward plan. At its best this provided a platform for collaborative learning, particularly if the artists were confident enough in their own practice to interpret the children's actions, their own responses and draw out pedagogical implications.

Resources as provocations

The project evolved into a model of resource-centred practice (Bergström, 2021). The resources were offered as a provocation to stimulate playful engagement on the part of the children. Typically, the artists set up the resources in one area, to signal their presence and as an invitation to the children. Stuff, and the concrete forms of activity it engendered had a form of visibility (look what we've brought in, look what we are doing with it) and play potentials intrinsic to the resources.

In a once weekly, drop-in visit over a short period of 10 weeks this approach is probably necessary. Thus, the artists demonstrated to the setting staff alternative ways to resource children's imaginative play with materials that had open-ended play potential - rather than didactic materials, conventional plastic toys or the familiar range of malleable and construction materials usually found in early childhood settings (often referred to as continuous provision).

There was very little use of resources that were already present in the setting. One artist commented that they might bring something into the setting, only for the setting staff to search out the same resource from their store cupboards. There might, however, be tension over using resources belonging to the setting and artists were sensitive to comments such as “using up all our masking tape”, “not putting the tops back on the felt tip pens correctly”, “egg shakers could get broken” or “chalks had to go back in the pots” (artists’ notes).

Although the artists were successful at engendering imaginative play stimulated by the resources, some found it more difficult to take children’s initial responses and develop them further. This may have been, in part, a consequence of artists being asked, in some settings, to work with large groups of children who might flit in and out and did not settle. But it also depended on having the pedagogical skills to scaffold children’s ideas. Artists often brought materials which invited certain directions in children’s play. These materials might engender construction building, modelling with clay or playdough, embodied play in and with boxes or imaginative combinations of loose parts.

The project tended to focus predominantly on resources and the children’s ideas as generated by those resources. There could be less attention paid to links with children’s existing and ongoing interests or forms of conceptual learning because the visits were once-weekly and the activities, although offering some continuity week-to-week, were, for the most part, stand-alone.

Pedagogy

Artist: *“The way you can work depends entirely on the setting”.*

The artists’ creative play experiences were situated within the pedagogical culture of each setting. Initially the artists had to take account of and negotiate their use of:

- Space and time (and children’s access in terms of space and time)
- Resources and materials
- Which staff they would work with, and how

The artists thus structured the children’s experiences both in terms of provision (indirect) and direct, face-to-face interactions. All these dimensions – materials, spaces, personal interactions – operate together, in synergy. In the later stages of the project, when the artists had accumulated more experience, it was noticeable that they had the experience and assertiveness to negotiate the indirect aspects with the setting staff more efficiently and in the best interests of the children.

A temporary time and space

When the artists visited, a temporary time/space was created in which they offered a playful activity. Often this play activity presented a different way of working and could

pose a challenge to the existing models of practice in the setting. The activity ideally drew members of staff into its orbit. The designated Early Years Practitioner would almost always participate and at best more staff would join in. At the very least the other staff would look over and see what was happening. The activity thus changed the dynamic of the setting; perhaps inviting, enlivening, challenging or sometimes creating tensions with the existing ways of working.

The artists’ ways of working varied greatly, not only due to the art form and the artists’ personal styles, but also depended on:

- The numbers of children, their ages and social and cultural backgrounds
- The spaces made available to the artists
- The size, type and degree of “readiness” and compatibility of the setting and the nature of participation by the Early Years Practitioner

Down on the floor

Artist: *“My best week was with the playdough, on the floor. Large quantities of it.”*

Much of the work of the artists took place on the floor (or on the ground outside). They would set up an area on the floor prior to the children arriving with their resources, perhaps a pile of cardboard boxes, or paper taped to the floor with pens to draw with, or willow structures. The artists too would be down on the floor, at children’s height, sitting with them, squatting, creeping and crawling into spaces and rolling on the floor.

Artist: *“She (referring to practitioner) was prepared to get down on the floor, she rolled down on the floor with the children.”*

Early Years Practitioner: *“I’m going to do mark-making on the floor. Big sheets of paper because I’ve seen that nearly all the children join in.”*

One artist showed photographs of a practitioner lying down on the ground outside, trying to wriggle through a small fabric gap made by the children. He commented on how she was prepared to get “down on the floor”. This seemed to be a sign of genuine commitment to joining in with the children’s play.

SY Notes: *“There is a lot of stuff now on the floor, including chalks, some of them broken and creating dusty chalk bits, and a huge pile of cardboard boxes.”*

The floor work introduced by the artists contrasted with the usual provision of play materials which were typically set out on tables. In many settings the furniture seemed to occupy much of the space and, from the children’s perspective, particularly the youngest children, to create a kind of obstacle course that they had to navigate (Grogan & Martlew, 2014). Sometimes the artists were confined to quite small areas of the setting – the only spaces where there was little or no furniture. Some artists preferred to work outside (in all weathers!) because, they said, it offered more space and freedom.

A pedagogy of listening

SY Observation Notes: *"A child is blowing through long cardboard tube exploring vocal sounds. M. (the artist) listened and then vocalised in response. M. and child exchange some quite loud vocal noises, - eee, ooo - in a back and forth game. Another child joins in the noisy tube-sounds game. Everyone laughs; enjoying a shared moment of silliness.*

Then the two children blow, silently, through the tubes and there is a noticeable shift in dynamic to calm and stillness. M. notices the change to blowing, the change in dynamic and shows how a feather can be blown through the tubes. Next the children experiment with blowing little bits of paper through the tubes.

The artist listens, observes and picks up the actions, the dynamics, and intentions, of the children, joining in. Then, she introduces something new to extend and give the activity direction at the point she intuitively feels it is needed. Creative, interactive pedagogy takes place in these small scale, subtle and often almost imperceptible, exchanges."

Freedom and ambition

When children discovered they had been granted freedom to follow their own ideas there sometimes followed a testing of boundaries. Grating polystyrene created a blizzard of small pieces. But when the child discovered that this activity was not closed down, but, on the contrary the artist joined in, playing with him, it evolved not into mess and chaos (as I feared when I saw it begin) but became a focused activity. Eventually the activity became so focused on the tiny, tiny pieces, that they were picked up, collected in little boxes, and fed painstakingly through the narrow neck of a bottle.

The artists would try to accommodate the ambition of a child's idea. How high can we make the willow stick flag? (by taping together long willow sticks) – and rather than restrict the ambition of how high, the artist scaffolded the making, and the flag grew to a great height, to the excitement of everyone.

This was a good example of how artists judged when, what and how much to contribute to an activity. The very tall flag making needed quite a lot of adult assistance to achieve the great height. On other occasions - think back to the clay and feather lion bird at the start of this report – they would see that their assistance was not needed and hold back.

The artists had to make frequent, "in the moment" assessments of safety, or of mess and chaos, or exuberance and noise, often in relation to a judgment of how much that particular setting could tolerate. Buckets and pulleys offered wonderful opportunities for exploratory play that the artists could be confident did not challenge boundaries for energetic, boisterous, large-scale play in that particular setting. However, a judgement as to the weight in the buckets and how they might fall was quickly assessed by the artist to ensure there were no accidents.

Sometimes this issue of boundaries was managed by working within a designated area where what was allowable might be more flexible. In settings where practice was more rigid, the activity might threaten the boundaries. In such situations, a response of staff might be to insist on symbolic acts of tidiness and control to which the artists were to comply. This could stifle the artists' ability to foster the children's freedoms to play and could be stressful.

SY Question: *"How did they [the setting staff] react – did they see it as mess?"*

Artist: *"They did get better, but you saw how carefully we cleaned up today. Another setting were really upset when we lost some tops to the felt-tip pens."*

Scale and scope

Artist: *"I was quite keen on these big sheets of lining paper. Yes. Not just for mark making, but for creating space and putting things vertically or horizontally, you know, lots of different kinds of ways of playing with that. And, and, hanging big stuff.. like the lycra that I brought in.*

Many resources that are typically provided for in an early childhood setting are modest and medium in scale and scope. What is termed, "continuous provision" results in the same materials and resources being set out permanently. In contrast artists would bring in resources that were large and expansive - or small, and in greater than expected quantities. Big pieces of paper across large areas of floor, huge pieces of fabric flapping outdoors.

These resources would fill a space, spilling and billowing out. They might bring natural resources in generous quantities – leaves, sticks, stones, shells, corks – free, or inexpensive, everyday items such as metal buckets, thick rope, masking tape, rolls of paper, cardboard boxes, and tubes.

Expansive play

Taking play into the outdoor spaces had many advantages. Outside it is easier to generate play around larger scale stuff and play that involves whole body, dramatic movements, or larger-scale structures. Combining expansive play outside with visuals and instruments to add sounds to the structures. Expansive play was sometimes brought indoors where, although it felt more restrictive, there were ways in which it could still take place.

Looking at things differently

The artists encourage children to look and see things differently - to peep through a tiny hole in the shed, into boxes, peer through tubes, filmy fabric, spy through a wooden ring, a mask, light up with torches (Grogan & Martlew, 2014). Or they would look up

with them, as high as the flag flapping in the sky or put their eye close to the ground to study an ants' nest together.

The absurd and funny

Several of the artists worked in a way that was deliberately looking for what was absurd, curious, and amusing. Children squashed themselves into a box that was too small and then tipped over with laughter, repeating the same movement several times. The artists watched and shared in the fun, commenting, laughing, rolling over on the floor themselves. Children stuck bits of paper on their faces, to make funny noses, funny ears – the artists and practitioners did the same, everyone laughing.

Creating narratives

The artists were ready to allow children to lead in evolving playful narratives of being in a lift, making a snowstorm, peeping at the sleeping dinosaur, spiders in a large-scale, wool-woven web and many more. The artists would enable narratives to evolve in responsive play with children, adding to the dialogue.

Child: *"There is a dinosaur in the shed."*
Artist: *"Yes, yes, a dinosaur. If I peep through this hole, I can see it. Can you see it?* (pausing) *You can?"*
Child: *"Look here are its footprints"* (pointing to the ground).
Artist: *"And more footprints."*

Picking up on the children's idea, the artist makes footprints with little wooden twigs and places them in different places for the children to find.

Child: *"I hear the dinosaur. It's got a long tail."*
Artist: singing – *it's got a long tail* – and quietly improvises a song on the words. Children pick up the sung phrase and repeat.
Child: (talking to other children) *"Sssh – keep quiet because of the dinosaur. It's sleeping in the shed."*
Child: (telling other children) *"There's a dinosaur in there, in the shed, and it's got a long neck and a long tail. Sshh it's sleeping."*

SY observation notes: *"The dinosaur narrative persists, and many children pick up on different aspects of it, integrating it into their ongoing play activities. A girl picks up a wooden curtain ring. She holds it to an eye and then goes to look for dinosaur footprints. She tells me the dinosaur is sleeping in the shed and it's got a long, long tail like this – gesturing the length. The narrative continues to thread through the morning's play."*

An expressive language that is meaningful for the children can emerge from playful creative activities. The children are motivated to search for ways to communicate their ideas, spontaneously, without prompting, both with the adults and with one another.

Such narrative play moves the children's verbal communications beyond simple factual answers to closed questions or low level naming that can be the mainstays of nursery practice.

Showing how and modelling skills

As the need arose, artists would show how to do something and model skills, usually making and modelling skills; how to tear off masking tape and avoid it crinkling, how to use art materials, how to cut some card, how to tie a knot, how to wrap wool around the willow sticks to make a spider's web.

The artist's self as resource

The drama and dance artists, in particular, saw themselves as a resource. They may not bring a material resource but danced with, interacted with, or created role-play and narratives with. They might look for movement ideas, or story ideas and become a character, mixing narratives with visuals such as drawings or objects as narrative props.

Possibility thinking

The artists had been introduced to "possibility thinking" (Craft, 2011) and encouraged to ask open-ended, prompting questions. They adopted this way of questioning or responding.

Artist had brought in oyster shells.

Child: *"What do you have to do?"* (with the oyster shells)
Artist: *"Whatever you want to do."*

Practice tag lines

In the seminars which brought all the artists together, discussions of work led to certain "tag lines", which usefully encapsulated an important aspect for ongoing work. For example: *"Hold your nerve"* – *"less is more"*. One challenge for pedagogical development is that artists are thinking in the moment and must make snap decisions about what to say, or do in response to the children, often relying on an intuitive, second sense. The short tag lines could assist the process of thinking in the moment.

Wider pedagogical repertoire

As the project progressed the artists became more confident and competent at ena-

bling child-centred, creative practice and expanded their pedagogical repertoire into processual, child-centred approaches. However, there were also occasions when they might have drawn on a wider pedagogical repertoire, for example when more directive, didactic approach might have been appropriate – e.g. to manage children's access to resources and opportunities, or to instruct children in a skill.

They were often diffident about adopting a more assertive role with the children, even when the children would have benefited from some form of direct intervention. They also, typically, did not expand their role to managing behaviour or dealing with the kinds of minor incidents that are part and parcel of early childhood practice, leaving those dimensions to the practitioners.

SY Notes: *"The artists are free to focus on their activity and this a luxury the permanent staff do not have. When one child cries, the CC peals away from the activity to comfort her. Later there's a disagreement between two children and the CC sorts this out. I realise that the artists don't include certain aspects of managing the children within their remit. The social relationships to negotiate entry into games, understand the 'rules' of the game, introduce new ideas, have possession or share certain items. All these are important aspects of learning to be part of the creative play. I wonder if we've spent enough time thinking about this in the seminars."*

Collaborative working: Paired Artists

For artists to work in pairs was a model of working that has evolved through several Take Art early years education projects. However, to place two artists who specialise in differing art forms – rather than the same art form - was a new venture.

"The collaborations are really interesting. Collaboration has deepened my work for me with cross-overs into other art forms"

"It becomes a bit more showy when it's two of us. It becomes a bit 'bigger' in the setting."

"There is more potential with the two of us – we can be more intensive with one-to-one interactions."

"It's coming out of your comfort zone, but feeling safe with your partner to try new things."

(Artist interview quotes)

The pairing introduced advantages. The artists were able to:

- Share practical ideas and inspiration
- Adopt an observation, documentation, review and reflect mode of working, as in-built in the reflective practice/action research model
- Offer emotional support for one another. For example, in one setting the artists could support one another in coping with a tense working environment

The pairing introduced challenges for the artists in how they:

- Collaborated on a personal and professional level
- Combined their art forms
- Distributed tasks (e.g. resource provision, documentation, presentation preparation)

The artist pairs varied as to how successful they have been. Some pairs collaboratively produced reflective documentation of high quality based on thoughtful, imaginative activity with the children. One pair of artists have gone on to collaborate with some further activities, beyond the project. One pair found it difficult to work together.

Some art forms are tricky to combine in practical work with children. Bringing art and music together, for example, presented both artists with more of a challenge whereas dance and music, both time-based art forms, combine more readily.

Finding ways to blend the art forms sometimes resulted in new imaginative approaches and sometimes in compromises to the quality of the artistic activity. Some artists developed more generic forms of combined, artistic, creative activity that were only loosely tied to their own discipline. All the artists described 'catching' their partner's art form to some extent and two in particular became very excited by the expansions to their practice that the opportunity to collaborate had engendered. The length of the project enabled the artists to develop approaches to working in partnership.

Musician: "Give me a pack of pens and I'm away.."
Visual artist: "I'm even doing a bit of singing.."

To consider:

- Providing more initial professional development for artists at the start of the placements

- Having an explicit philosophy and/or pedagogical model that frames the work from the outset

- Being clear on the pros and cons of pairing artists who have different art forms and what the artists' needs for support and mentoring might be

Artists' Mentor Role

Jane Parker of Take Art took on the role of mentor to the artists. Artists could share information and ideas in a WhatsApp group, to which the mentor actively contributed, providing advice, feedback or sources of inspiration and information. The mentor kept in touch with the artists. The role was pivotal when any issues arose, particularly in relation to working within settings.

The mentor could act swiftly and sensitively to help resolve issues or suggest alter-

native courses of action. The role might have benefitted from greater structure built into the project design from the outset and this links with the recognition, in retrospect, that more time given to workforce development at the start of the project would have been valuable. However, the project began at the tail end of the pandemic when everyone was cautiously moving back into person-to-person contact and there were still restrictions in place.

THE SETTINGS AND STAFF

Early Years Practitioner: *"As I watch the artists I'm thinking – that's how I should be as a practitioner – because all the other things we have to do are taking away from the holistic experience of being in that moment with that child."*

Early Years Practitioner: *"It's been like a refresher course. The passion back, yes, it's brought my passion back. When we've got so much to do, it made us think again."*

The settings were located in:

Derby City: urban
Somerset: rural and county town
Surrey: suburban

It is important to understand how a project is determined by the current context, particularly when that context is a shifting landscape. As already emphasised, the project began just as the sector was coming out of the pandemic.

The sector was over-extended and under-funded prior to the pandemic but the pandemic had both highlighted and exacerbated these systemic issues. Arts organisations need to be knowledgeable and sensitive to how the sector operates, and the different types of provision, if the design, organisation and delivery of projects is to be successful. For this reason detail about the current context and types of provision for early childhood education is included here.

The early years is beset by a number of systemic issues (Nuffield Foundation, undated):

- Undervalued and low status
- Low pay and high workload
- High staff turnover
- Low or no qualifications and the training infrastructure is poor

It is known that:

- Early childhood education can have positive impacts for children, at least for the short term
- Children of the lowest socio-economic status benefit the most
- However benefits accrue from quality provision. The quality of staff is key.

Artist: *"So much fire-fighting, the staff are caught up in the day-to-day demands"*
Artist: *"the setting staff feel ground down – it's a sector where you're expected to just give and give."*

The place of play in the current context

Play in current education policy is being hi-jacked for educational purposes and the value of child-initiated, open-ended play, is being lost (see Parker & Thomsen, 2019). The policy emphasis is on planned purposeful play in which adults take a strong guiding or leading role. Play is seen as a medium for promoting learning in pre-defined areas.

Practitioner: *"For each child we have a target, count to 5, or know their colours. And each week we try to work towards that target."*

Many staff working in early childhood education recognise the tension between their own understanding of play and belief in its value - and the statutory requirements.

Derby, HT of maintained nursery: *"We do try to be laid back and go with the flow, but the curriculum is pressing in, we have all these objectives to follow."*

In other settings, the school readiness agenda was dominant.

Artist (referring to maintained nursery attached to primary school): *"It's a very academic school and there's pressure on the nursery to get the children ready for school – we're not going to change that."*

The arrival of the project team could reconnect practitioners with a philosophy of play and child-centred pedagogy they understand and believe in. There is a persistent tension between the themes and ideas that may arise in children's play and the defined curriculum goals and learning outcomes. Educators tended to view the children's play through the lens of these goals and outcomes whereas the artists viewed play as exploratory and open-ended and waited to discover what was important to the children.

The settings are under pressure due to:

- Overloading with curriculum targets
- Shortage of funding
- Work intensification 'I'm caught up in day-to-day demands' (nursery manager)
- Widening responsibilities: taking on the work of social services and basic care such as food, clothing, hygiene
- Declining morale

The recruitment of staff is a challenge for all settings (see Education Policy Institute report, 2019) and has worsened since the pandemic. Even releasing staff for a reflective meeting with artists could create pressure on tight staffing budgets, particularly for the small, private settings.

Types of setting

The sector is characterised by a mixed market of provision, due, in part, to a continual tension between supporting development and learning in young children and providing childcare for working parents. Very broadly it can be separated into two types of provision: maintained and private. The project worked across both types of provision.

School-based providers (preschools attached to schools) and maintained nurseries:

- Are financially stable and offer better conditions and salaries than private nurseries
- Have higher qualified staff, including input from qualified teachers, and fewer problems with recruitment and retention
- Operate school hours with perhaps 'wrap-around' hours
- Work in purpose built or school-based buildings
- Have a high proportion of older preschool children who transition into the attached reception class

Group-based providers and individual owners:

- Experience financial challenges, particularly because of the pandemic and hourly pay is low (in comparison with maintained)
- Hire lower qualified staff and often have a high turnover of staff
- Operate for long hours
- Work in converted, non-purpose-built, premises
- Have a higher proportion of younger children, babies and toddlers

Post-pandemic

The project management team was highly sensitive to the fragile nature of the sector and concerned to prioritise the wellbeing of staff and children and to be providing support.

"We had hoped that the residencies would start – but it's just too early for the in-depth learning. Whole sector is fragile – we should provide work that does not carry a heavy agenda but is manageable. That's not possible at the level we want for the Summer. The deeper engagement will start at the Autumn." (Project manager, meeting notes, 22.03.21)

While the acute phase of the pandemic may be behind us, the recovery of the early years sector is not secured. After the pandemic maintained settings were able to re-establish their provision more quickly than non-maintained. The pandemic had more serious consequences for private settings, particularly the smaller settings in rural areas.

Small children have had a tough time during the pandemic and families have been stressed. Setting staff find that they are increasingly providing forms of support that might previously have been provided by outside agencies. For children there was concern for the effects of the pandemic lockdowns on children. There was evidence of lower social skills, and communication and language delays, particularly among 2-year-olds.

Derby: superdiverse settings

In Britain, what are being termed “super-diverse” settings are increasingly prevalent and the Derby settings would qualify for this descriptor. Yet the pedagogical implications of super-diversity are not well understood, as Tatham-Fashanu explains (2023). She proposes a concept of ‘third space pedagogy’ where children can use creativity to weave between their cultural backgrounds and the demands of accommodating to early childhood education.

The two Derby based artists became interested in storytelling and how children whose home language is not English may be working within and across languages in their story-telling. The home, the family, the peer group, the community, popular culture all provide funds of knowledge from which a child draws when playing in settings.

Tatham-Fashanu’s study suggested that the greater the scope for child-led activity, the deeper and richer the children could operate in a third space where they can not only integrate the diversity of their experiences, but also generate a richer and more complex understanding.

Early Childhood Creative Environment Rating Scale (ECCERS Scale)

In the final year of the project artists were asked to complete an environment rating scale at the start of each placement and at its conclusion. The scale was based on the ECERS scale (Early childhood environment rating scale, 2014), a well-known and widely used formal rating scale that was adapted, specifically for this project, to focus on creative dimensions (named the ECCERS: Early Childhood Creative Environment Rating Scale). The scale was only applied in the final year when the artists’ own practice had become established.

The aim of the scale was to plot any changes, primarily pertaining to the provision of resources, allocation of time, space and staff and planning that may have been promoted during the project. The scale contains 18 different, quite specific, descriptors which are scaled to a level of 4. The rating was completed without consultation with

the setting staff. While this secrecy felt uncomfortable, from past experience, setting staff tend to rate all the categories generously because they only know their own setting. Moreover, if the artists had been seen carrying out an itemised checklist of provision at the start of a placement, it would have risked starting the placement on the wrong footing.

A total of 8 settings were assessed. The rating scale usefully identified the overall character of the settings. Settings tended to score roughly around the same level in all areas; where provision was limited, pedagogical interactions and planning would also be limited. Likewise, where provision for creative play activities was generous it went hand-in-hand with an overall ethos that promoted creativity and playful, imaginative activities. Interestingly both low scoring or higher scoring settings showed little or minimal change by the end of the placement. Lower scores typically reflect an overall culture of rigid practices that would have needed more concerted input and change at the level of management to shift.

The lack of change in higher scoring settings was an interesting finding and could be interpreted a number of ways. It could have been simply that the rating scale was not fine-grained enough to pick up the more sophisticated type of changes that were taking place. It could have been due to a culture of confidence, perhaps even bordering on complacency that the setting practice was good and did not need to change. It could have been that the project’s methods for promoting change i.e. modelling, reflective practice did not identify a need for change or engender change where the practice scored relatively high at the start of the project.

Medium scoring settings, which were the majority, showed the greatest change. While acknowledging that this might have been due to an inbuilt characteristic of the rating scale, there were other sources of information (visits, observations, conversations with artists, final interviews with settings staff) which would seem to confirm this conclusion. These settings were not set in their ways, had a positive disposition towards providing for playful activities and so the modelling and impetus from the artists encouraged them to make certain changes.

These changes were:

- Resources: using existing resources in new ways and/or purchasing new resources.

- Pedagogy: incorporating more playful pedagogy. Very often this was about being reminded of the value of play, the value of observing and joining in play with the children and confidence, commitment, and interest in that way of working being re-ignited. One practitioner talked of “having found her mojo again”, another said she will “not allow myself to be constantly distracted”

- Provision of time, space, routines: revaluating how these were being allocated. For example, one setting decided to establish a weekly “Take Art type” session when they would create space and time for resource-driven, creative play. There was also, in some settings, a re-evaluation of how space, both indoors and outside,

could be used to accommodate more creative, playful activities.

As explained above, the project had the greatest influence on practice when the setting already had an ethos and culture of play. The maintained settings where practice was led by qualified teachers tended to have a stronger play ethos than smaller, private settings with less qualified staff.

The larger, maintained settings recognised that the emphasis on play was being hi-jacked by current curricular requirements and understood the tension between meeting externally imposed requirements and what they understood as good early childhood practice. In these settings the project connected with an existing priority, providing extra impetus or reminders of the importance of play for its own sake in a policy environment where play is being diverted by other demands.

The artists, however, were unsure of their authority with respect to working with the practitioners with the aim of influencing their practice. “I don’t feel comfortable telling them what to do”, remarked one. The project had been offered to the settings; they had not sought it out as an identified need connected with their annual development plan. The artists were therefore often unsure in their role of working with the staff to develop practice.

There were no perceived, major changes to the overall culture of any settings with respect to creative, playful activity. Such changes would require changes at the level of management and organisational structure. Moreover for this to take place, either the project had to be promoted, initially, as a model of change, perhaps with authority bestowed upon it from a local education authority (see Moonbeams reports, e.g. Arts Connect 2023), or by promoting itself as a distinctive, “branded” approach (e.g. the “Curiosity Approach”, also Starcatchers’ Creative Skills programme, Starcatchers 2019) and the initiation and request for the project coming from the settings.

Interestingly, some settings identified the Take Art approach as a named, distinctive approach and staff said that they would continue a Take Art activity, once a week, beyond the end of the project. While this is valuable what this misses is the embedding of a pedagogical emphasis on play and imagination across the everyday practice of the whole setting. One artist suggested that it would have been valuable for the setting staff to have a CPD session at the start of the placement to develop their understanding of play and creativity.

In part the artists’ reticence about their role with respect to CPD for setting staff highlights a need for national systems of qualification and a defined professional identity that can legitimise the work of creative artists in educational practice and bolster their identity, expertise and sense of authority when working with education professionals.

The role of the Early Years Practitioner

One member of staff in every setting was designated the “Early Years Practitioner”. Their role was to work with the artists and to participate in the reflective session at the end of each visit. How they enacted their role was crucial to the project. In every setting, the early years practitioner took on the role in different ways.

Artist: *“A lot of the things we did they’d say, Oh, yeah, we could do this. Oh, yeah, we can do this roll of paper thing. And it almost like reminded them of techniques that they’d learned, just so they might return back to that.”*

Early years practitioner: *“It’s simple things I’ve learnt. I’ve never thought of swamping one area on the floor with one resource and encouraging them to play freely with it, without a specific aim.”*

Early years practitioner: *“It’s helped me to think outside the box, to use resources in different ways.”*

The Early Years Practitioners would participate in the activities in varying ways that suggested different levels of commitment, confidence, and engagement. So, for setting practitioners to join in with dancing, acting, or singing requires more confidence, than, perhaps to sit by an activity and help with pens and paper or hover on the sidelines using a tablet to film the children.

There were different levels of participation:

- Observing and filming
- Joining in with resource-centred play
- Joining in with embodied play or role play
- Joining in with dance or singing

Early years practitioner: *“I’ve joined the scrap store. I’ve been twice already, my cupboards are full of tubes and pieces of material.”*

There were wide variations in the qualification level of the Early Years Practitioners, ranging from qualified teacher status, with years of experience, to no relevant qualifications and merely a few weeks of prior experience. The selection of the Early Years Practitioner was, in part, an indicator of the commitment of the setting to the project. In one setting, all three members of staff shared the role reflecting their enthusiasm and interest.

In another setting, the headteacher of the maintained nursery took the role, but had misjudged what it involved and could give it little time. In another setting, the Early Years Practitioner incorporated the role into her ECT (Early Career Teacher) development year and so was committed to demonstrate outcomes in order to pass her ECT requirements. This CC showed considerable enthusiasm and the dovetailing of the role into her wider professional development stimulated how she undertook the role.

Whether the CC could influence the culture of practice in the setting as a whole, as mentioned earlier, depended on management for support. Some CCs spoke of taking staff meeting time to develop creative practice with their colleagues. In one large, maintained nursery school the HT joined the reflective practice meetings alongside

her staff and the project usefully served to bolster her own commitment to play in the face of many competing demands.

Early years practitioner: *"Getting other staff on board will be the issue, hopefully I can get that over to the other staff, bringing it to the forefront."*

While there may be some disappointment that, in some settings, the project did not have a major impact on the wider culture of practice there are some important considerations:

1. Promoting play to foster creativity is 'swimming against the tide' and competing with very different messages from policy, requirements from inspection systems (OfSTED) and the recommended practice approaches that staff will encounter in training.

2. Many early childhood settings have limited capacity for change (for reasons explained earlier).

3. In the early placements, more than half of the artist team lacked experience in developing child-initiated play in early childhood and needed to establish their own practice first, before there could be any expectation of handover. The project focus, at least in the early stages, had to be the professional development of the artists.

4. The project was not explicitly offering CPD of a defined pedagogical approach to the setting staff, and any processes of handover were more implicit than explicit.

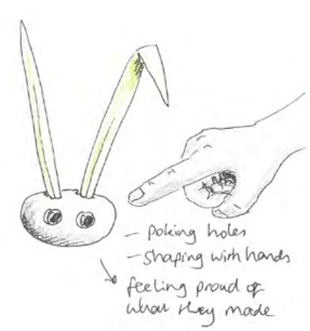
To consider:

- Arts organisations should be aware of the different types of early childhood provision, and how that affects the selection of placements and how they are negotiated and managed.

- Arts organisations need to be aware of the current (and shifting) contexts for early childhood education and plan projects accordingly.

- "Branding" the approach might be a pragmatic approach to encourage the uptake of the work by settings. This might also facilitate the promotion of the work to settings.

- In order to engender changes in practice among setting staff, the artists need first to be confident and clear in their own practice and then know how to lead professional development.



ARTS ORGANISATIONS AND MANAGEMENT

Project structure

The project was complex, combining 3 different arts organisations and short placements that required continual recruitment of new settings and coordinating those placements. In addition, the performance programme also called for schedules, locations, and detailed arrangements. As a result, the project was administration-heavy for the organising teams.

It became apparent during the project that there is a tension between 'ideal models' of project planning - and the reality in practice - and how important a certain amount of flexibility becomes. Geographically and demographically the 3 locations were very different. In a low population rural county such as Somerset, settings are widely dispersed and often very small and privately run. This location presents challenges of travel distances, time and resulting carbon footprint. In complete contrast, Derby is an urban location with several maintained, large nurseries within a relatively small inner city area serving a diverse population.

10 week placement

Ten week placements (a term), seem to have become a norm in project structure. Yet, it is worth noting that in the early 2000s one year placements were the norm and considered essential for the consolidation of practice and the implementation of change (see Little Big Bang Project Report, 2012 in which some placements were 2 years). The compression of placements in order to reach more children seems to be a consequence of the audit culture in which quantity has become a simple measure of success.

Projects feel impelled to reach many children in many settings. Clearly participant numbers to a one-off performance or entry into a museum is markedly different measure of 'success' in comparison with the quality of experience and learning for children taking part in an educational project.

I have elsewhere written about the consequences of what I termed "projectisation" –

short termism, the proliferation of certain types of practice as a consequence of short term funding and the demands that they impose (Young, 2021). The Little Big Bang Project (also funded by PHF) explicitly sought to overcome the weaknesses of short term placements within certain project structures, and that report is a reminder of what might continue to be held as ideals without compromising to current exigencies.

From a top-down management and funder's perspective, 10 weeks may seem ample. From the artists' 'bottom up' perspective, 10 weeks (shortened to 9 to allow for meetings week 1) is barely long enough to establish working relationships with the staff, patterns of work, get to know the children and so on. Quite often a week might be lost due to illness or other unforeseen circumstances, and so placements were even shorter.

The ten week placement encourages a certain way of working. The artists needed to initiate activity from the very beginning. They needed to be confident that the activities they introduced would "work" and be seen to "work" and this curtailed their freedom to be genuinely experimental. There was no time to wait and see, to make mistakes, to evolve activities slowly in partnership with the setting staff. Their work inevitably remained a short term "add on" from outside rather than an integrated dimension of the setting practice.

There are certainly some advantages of short and ever-changing placements. The artists could repeat 'what worked' in follow-on settings and start to establish a signature model of working (Thomson, Hall, Jones & Sefton-Green, 2012). They accumulated experience rapidly because of the demands of always adjusting to a new group of children in a new environment. However, more consolidated, and integrated work, what I have called "everyday" work (Take Art, 2012) which allowed the artists more time to dwell on their own role, to explore and refine pedagogical approaches and adjust to the setting and its context was less possible.

Recruitment of artists

The artist positions were advertised widely, and short lists drawn up. At interview applicants were invited to present an activity they thought suitable for preschool children, as well as responding to a range of questions.

Community Projects Coordinator (CPC), Derby Theatre: *"We struggled with recruitment – that was a big issue – and that might potentially be an issue going forward. It was a new area for the theatre."*

Manager, Take Art: *"Take Art had a history of EY arts and so there are artists in the county who they have worked with before and so recruitment was relatively straightforward. However, we rely on artists located across the county because of travel distances involved."*

The artists required a range of skills and prior experience for the role and there is no established professional role or identity for early years creative professionals. In

general, freelance artists tend to shy away from work in the early years preferring to work with older children and adults. Developing the workforce continues to be a high priority.

Recruitment of settings

Community Projects Coordinator, Derby Theatre: *"It proved so difficult to start with, coming out of lockdown and getting people involved and I had so many rebukes – no staff, no money – specifically from private settings and I didn't have the backing that Take Art has with their local authority. They weren't really interested."*

For arts organisations to build working relationships with the early childhood sector takes time and commitment. Take Art, located in Somerset, benefits from longstanding and positive relationships with the county early years team. However, these relationships need to be maintained and the project team attended briefings and meetings and attended county conferences. This takes up project staff time, but the investment is worthwhile.

Derby Theatre - located in an urban environment with a high proportion of maintained nursery settings within a small area - learnt quickly that relationship-building with individual, maintained settings was the best approach in their location. Moreover, for Derby Theatre the project represented a move into a new area of activity. The community project coordinator (CPC) had time to dedicate to the project, not only setting up the placements but keeping in close touch with the progress of the work and gaining hands-on and insightful experience.

Derby theatre now have a fund of knowledge held by their community CPC. This commitment has paid off, 'it's kick started a lot of things' said the coordinator and the theatre is now involved in further early years and arts work.

"Selling it"

CPC, Derby: *"The thing we wanted to do was to look at areas that would benefit the most – the deprived areas, where we also work in other roles, and I did it from there – making an appointment to go and see them, tell them about it. Going in, not just sending an email. "Selling it" and what you want to do. We've just built so many good positive relationships. I know now that I can call on at least 3 of them now and say we've got this, do you want to get involved?"*

"Selling" the project required confidence, commitment, and persistence. But it didn't suit everyone. The Surrey Arts project coordinator had taken on the role partway through the project and said: *"I felt it was a salesperson's job and I'm not great at that, I didn't enjoy it."* However, she had enjoyed the delivery and participating in the work with children.

Not only is the early childhood sector highly fragmented, but there are also significant

geographical variations. This variation points to the importance of local knowledge and experience, as demonstrated by this project. Building relationships with individual settings, with key staff from county or city early years teams and understanding how settings operate is necessary foundational work for arts organisations which this project enabled.

Communicating the project to settings

How the project was explained to settings determined their expectations. It was often handed down the line from project manager, to setting manager, to key staff, to additional staff and, like Chinese whispers, could be distorted. Artists frequently found that there was a mismatch between the staff's understanding of the work and what they were expecting to do. While they acknowledged that there will always be an initial process of negotiating and adjusting, sometimes the mismatch of expectations caused some initial problems.

As the project progressed, the project manager and the two regional coordinators recognised the importance of clarity of expectations from the start and worked hard to communicate accurately. This was an important aspect of the learning for the arts organisations.

Nipping potential problems in the bud

The overall project manager had a key role in responding quickly to any potential issues that arose. Although rare, they typically surfaced early in a placement. In the few such instances, she acted promptly and decisively.

Freelance artists

The project relied on freelance artists to lead the participatory work in the settings and to provide and produce the performance programme. Freelancers therefore played a critical role in this project – as indeed they do across the creative sectors. Yet, as recent reports are confirming, a lack of attention from policymakers means that this vital part of the workforce face unique challenges relating to pay, conditions and rights (see e.g., Wales Freelancers Task Force report, 2020; also Freelancers Make Theatre Work, 2023).

The pandemic had a greater impact on freelance and self-employed workers than on employed staff (Walmsley et al, 2022). The study by Walmsley and colleagues reported that the sector is facing significant skills and workforce gaps. This project revealed that artists skilled and experienced to work in the early childhood sector are few and recruitment was a challenge. Moreover, the project had to provide more training in the early stages than anticipated to compensate for lack of experience.

There is an imbalance of power between freelance artists and organisations consisting of permanent paid staff. Freelance artists experience precarious working conditions and rates of pay which do not include benefits such as holiday pay and pension contributions. The artists working on this project received good rates of pay (certainly considerably higher than the staff in early years settings), but the issue of under-payment and under-value should always be held in mind.

Freelance theatre and dance artists creating performances need time, space, and support to engage their creative process. The project was unable to run the creative theatre training workshops that had been an original intention at the start of the project due to the pandemic. Derby theatre used additional funds to commission a theatre piece which toured as part of the project.

There is a widespread call for an increase in structural support for freelance theatre and dance makers (actors, dancers, designers, producers, directors) through continued and increased funding for residencies, collaborations, and networking. Feedback from some project team members suggested that the selection of performance groups that tour should be transparent and open to scrutiny.

To consider:

- The pros and cons of placement length. One option is to begin a 3 year project with longer placements to allow artists to develop their practice and then move to shorter placements.

- Geographic reality needs to be considered in designing a project. A project design that is well suited to urban areas may be less suited to a sparsely populated rural area - and vice versa.

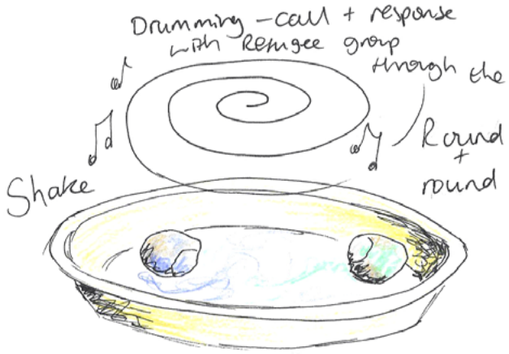
- The crucial role of a 'hands-on' energetic manager and regional coordinators.

- The challenges of finding and negotiating placements and performance tours and the management time and budget this absorbs.

- Advice for new partners in how to recruit settings, perhaps with a checklist or script for initial discussions.

- Workforce development (which should include ways to diversify the workforce) requires strategic attention, financed by project budget. There is a haste to deliver and perhaps a lack of awareness among arts organisation leaders as to the skills and knowledge required by arts professionals to work in early childhood education and their need for professional development time.

- Review policies for the employment and selection of freelance artists for all roles and ensure all selection processes are transparent.



PERFORMANCES

All three cultural organisations are committed to bringing quality cultural experiences to wider audiences and therefore the inclusion of theatre performances provided by seven children's theatre companies on tour to early childhood settings and some theatre venues was a key strand of the project.

The performances were observed by members of the project team and notes made according to a common set of key criteria. Internally this provided important information about quality, reception and children's engagement for Take Art's internal monitoring and evaluation purposes. However, the performances were, for the most part, stand-alone, as I explain below, and only some connected to the placements. This report focuses on the action research which was concerned primarily with the work of the artists in settings. Here I mention where connections did occur.

Connections

There was an original aim in the design of the project to create forms of connection and cross-over between the placements and the performances. There were two straightforward reasons why this did not quite work as originally conceived. First because the pandemic was still impacting on the early stages of the project and a plan to run performer workshops did not take place. Second was due to the practicality of coordinating placements with performances. Logistics meant that only in a few instances could the performances take place at a time close to or during the placements.

Artist: *"In W. nursery we tried to re-visit the theme from the theatre performance, but the gap was too long."*

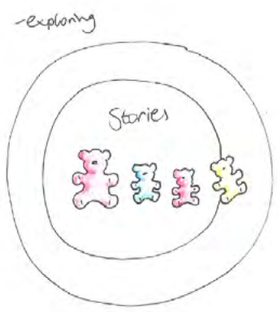
However, sometimes cross-over between performance and the artists' activity did happen successfully.

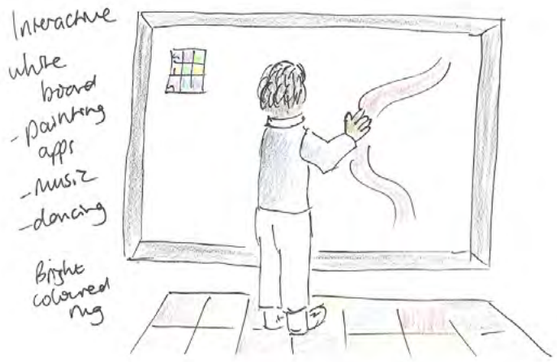
Early years practitioner: *"The children had seen all the paper in the performance and then M and R came the next day and so the children had all kinds of ideas for what to do with the paper."*

That is not to say that the theatre performances did not have an important effect on the children, as revealed in their play. Here is a vivid example of children's play being influenced by the theatre piece, It's a Square World, performed by a wheelchair user. In the outdoor play area, there were some large wooden spools and children were pretending they were wheelchairs. One girl said she had broken her leg (sticking her leg out to pretend it was broken) and so she needed to use a spool-wheelchair. She called to the other children, *"don't laugh at me"* [because I'm using the wheelchair]!

Using children's ideas

Derby theatre commissioned a theatre piece from Sarah Argent to be part of the project. Titled, Let's Play Messing Around, Sarah used the photos, video clips and observation notes that the artists had collated on the shared platform as inspiration for her theatre piece. Thus, the performance captured activities and interactions between the two performers which drew directly from children's play themes and interests.





ACTION RESEARCH

The project proposal incorporated an action research dimension inspired by the principles of Reggio Emilia pedagogy. This was in keeping with prior arts projects in early childhood education run by Take Art and projects by other organisations (e.g. 5X5X5, Moonbeams, Starcatchers Theatre, Sightlines Initiative). The early childhood educational principles of observation, documentation, and reflection on the children's activity in order to deepen understanding and forward plan are scaled up to become the principles of Action Research that are incorporated in the project as a whole.

Often described as Review, Reflect and Refine, Action Research (AR) is a methodological approach which allows for emerging findings to feed back into work in order to influence its direction. The project included seminar days at regular intervals for the purposes of AR (usually at the end of each project period). AR is a continuous process that takes place in the many dialogues between mentor, artists, researcher, and manager in which certain decisions are made about how to progress. The researcher is not detached from the work, but an active and involved member of the team.

The overall action research methodological approach is qualitative. Qualitative research collects varied types of information. In this project the information included:

- Artists' documentation of their practice: photos, video clips, notes
- Case studies of children
- Seminar day presentations, notes and interviews
- Visits to observe practice in action
- Website information about settings and Ofsted reports
- Information about artists' backgrounds and CVs
- Initial interviews and concluding interviews with all personnel
- Interviews with practitioners in the settings
- ECCERS recording scale applied pre and post placements

The information is accumulated and analysed to identify key themes. Qualitative methods contrast with quantitative research which aims to assess and measure in a systematic, usually numerical, way. Qualitative research is particularly well suited to real world activity in education and to children's creative learning. It also allows for what is unanticipated to emerge and what is not easily captured through formal assessments and measurement.

Qualitative research can be criticised for being "soft" and not providing hard evidence in the form of measurements or conclusions of outcomes or impact assessments. However, properly conducted, qualitative research substantiates its interpretations through the rigour of its procedures, the quantity and variety of information it has gathered and the importance it gives to the influence of contextual factors. Qualitative research also triangulates its interpretations by connecting with a wider knowledge base, beyond the project itself – thus it involves cross-referencing to other projects and studies as a way of strengthening what it is saying.

Action research:

- Is situation and context-based
- Is a process for improving educational practice. Its methods involve action, evaluation, and reflection. It gathers evidence to implement change in practices
- Is participative and collaborative
- Findings emerge as action develops and takes place; however, they are not conclusive or absolute, but ongoing

In comparison with evaluation

The arts organisation managers involved in the project were more familiar with forms of evaluation that are typically applied in community arts projects and, on a number of occasions, expressed concern that evaluation, as they understood it, of the Making & Believing project was not taking place. Evaluation asks whether a project has met aims that are specifically defined from the outset, framing the project as a form of intervention. It is focused on the end point, the outcome and stays detached from the process. In contrast action research is integrated into the process.

The shortcomings of evaluation as it has evolved in arts organisation practice has been subject to much criticism (Belfiore; 2021; also Belfiore & Bennett, 2010). Moreover the Making & Believing project was an education project explicitly designed around an action research/Reggio pedagogy approach, not a social intervention or community arts project. In my background reading I came across a similar issue of tension around expectations by arts organisation personnel for evaluation producing evidence of impact in contrast to the creative action research process run by educators that was embedded in the project.

This arose in a recent large-scale, high cost, schools creative programme in Wales (Llywodraeth Cymru, Welsh Government, 2020, see 5.18). In this programme expectations of generating evidence of impact conflicted with the creative programme that aimed to develop "creativity and the whole child". The authors of this report stated - rather bluntly perhaps - that the arts organisation staff needed to "change attitudes" (ibid).

To consider:

- Arts organisation personnel might benefit from training in evaluation and research processes as they are applied in projects with an educational dimension.

- Action research is a time-consuming process, particularly for analysis and write-up, and project planning in terms of allocation of personnel, time and budget should take that into account.

KEY FEATURES AND STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

This final section briefly concludes the achievements of the project. It also provides suggestions for future work and how to make the most of the expertise developed during the project.

This project worked within two sets of organisational structures and constraints – arts organisation and early childhood education - and both sectors had been impacted by the pandemic. Many of the findings and interpretations were strongly determined by the current context for early childhood education. The existing financial, structural, staffing and policy situation with respect to early childhood education and the dominance of "school readiness" agenda affected the settings differentially and affected how receptive they were to the artists' work (see also Hoskins & Smedley, 2019).

Similarly, the arts and performance sectors are beset by financial, structural, and systemic problems. It will take a dramatic change of policies and government funding decisions to properly address the problems in both sectors, education and arts and culture.

There is much talk within both sectors of "hope" (Robinson, 2021; Pascal, 2023) and of creative resilience as a form of resistance rather than simply accommodating to systems which, many say, are going the wrong directions and failing to address inequalities and impending crises. A strong sense of value and principles is needed, together with a self-determined ability to work to a core purpose and identity. The artists' ways of working reminded staff in many settings of the value of play and the importance of fostering children's imagination and independence as learners. The project work thus boosted creative resilience and a sense of hope.

There is much to do in raising awareness of creative pedagogy and the skilfulness required to develop quality play-based, creative, and imaginative work with young children. The development of understanding and knowledge of children's play processes and the adult pedagogical role remains a priority. Artists who have experience of early childhood education and qualifications to equip them well for this work are few. Fortunately, the long duration of the project, and ensuring continuity of the same artist team, enabled the artists to evolve signature ways of working.

Some innovative and quality models of practice emerged including outdoor expansive play with large scale resources, narrative play in superdiverse settings and dynamic movement-music play combining with visual and material resources. All artists developed their practice and can now apply that learning in follow-on work. This all points to a need to make workforce development a priority and to pay greater attention to needs for professional training.

Most creative arts in education projects are initiated, planned and run by educators who then connect with cultural organisations and artists. If cultural and arts organisations are involved, they are typically partners following the lead of education specialists. Take Art had evolved a programme of arts in education projects, learning much from its close neighbour 5X5X5=Creativity and always involving education professionals in planning from first stages.

The management teams of all three partners added considerably to their understanding of how to organise and manage work in the early childhood sector. If arts organisations are to expand into educational work, then those who design and run such projects need to be knowledgeable of the contexts and specifics of early childhood educational practice, seek out experts and listen to them carefully. Experience of community arts practice does not transfer directly to educational arts practice.

The project has highlighted the ongoing challenge of promoting transfer and learning within the early childhood setting. It should be recognised that promoting change in practice is always difficult. While some artists possessed coaching skills and the confidence to train others – this element was not explicitly written into the project, nor was it a definite expectation. Moreover, until the artists had a secure and competent pedagogical practice, there could be no expectation of hand-on. Only in a later seminar was it appropriate to instruct artists in the processes of how to promote professional development.

Any transfer happened largely through modelling and by osmosis, rather than any form of direct training. A stand-alone professional development programme, for artists and/or for artists and practitioners, would have given that strand of the project more definition and strength.

To consider:

- Recognising the centrality of pedagogical practice and its principles
- Defining and communicating a message of hopeful pedagogy and creative resilience
- Aspiring to an ideal model of early childhood creative practitioner and using that ideal model to inform project design
- Developing the workforce – artists, setting staff, arts organisation staff – as a priority

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ABOUT DR SUSAN YOUNG

Susan Young lectured at the universities of Exeter and Roehampton specialising in early childhood, music education and childhood studies. In her early career she taught in primary schools, early childhood settings and secondary schools. Now retired, she holds the position of Honorary Distinguished Fellow at the Centre for Research in Early Childhood (CREC), Birmingham. She has completed PhDs in music education and biological anthropology, and originally trained as a pianist before gaining qualifications to teach. She has participated in many early childhood projects that have focused on music, theatre and creativity and has worked closely with a range of arts organisations. She has written several books and numerous articles and is frequently invited to speak at conferences, both nationally and internationally.

APPENDIX

Creative Practitioners - The Artists

Somerset:
Richard Tomlinson
Amy Hardwick
Hannah LeFeuvre
Araceli Carbara

Derby:
Monika Johnson
Rachel Scanlon

Surrey:
Kate Comberti
Charlie Betts
Michaela Collings

Theatre & Dance Companies

Beeja Dance with Choogh, Choogh
Lyngo Theatre with Egg & Spoon
Fibbertigibbet Theatre with Babble
Jienkyo/Arts Fraction Foundation with Kuuki
Sarah Argent/Derby Theatre with Let's Play Messing Around
Takeshi Matsumoto with Club Origami
Daryl & Co with A Square World

Early Years Settings that hosted creative residencies

Take Art - Somerset
Acorn Day Nursery, Somerton
Brue Farm Day Nursery, Castle Cary
Toybox Nursery, Yeovil
Yeovilteenies Day Nursery, RANS Yeovilton
Little Learners Pre-School, Primrose Lane School, Yeovil
Pen Mill Infant and Nursery Academy, Yeovil
Apple Orchard Preschool, Herne View C of E Primary School, Ilminster
Little Kingfishers Nursery, Kingfishers Primary School, Yeovil
Maiden Beech Primary Academy, Crewkerne
Little Otters Pre-School. Otterhampton Primary School, Combwich, Bridgwater

Derby Theatre - Derby City
White Cross Nursery School
Rosehill Infant & Nursery School
Harrington Nursery School
Lord Street Community Nursery
Central Community Nursery

Surrey Arts
St Michaels Community Nursery, Dorking
Foundations Pre-School, Woking
Furzehill Nursery & Primary School, Redhill
St Michael's Primary School & Nursery, Ashford
Hazelwood Early Years & Nursery School, Oxted

Making & Believing Project Staff
Jennie Loader – Project Manager, Take Art
Jane Parker – Artist Mentor, Take Art
Nadine Griffiths – Project Co-ordinator, Take Art
Caroline Barth – Project Lead, Derby Theatre
Cheryl Mitchell – Project Co-ordinator, Derby Theatre
Abbie Richardson – Project Lead, Surrey Arts
Susan Dinmore – Project Co-ordinator, Surrey Arts

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