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Artist involvement in settings

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Building artist involvement in early years: the foundations

This article is the first in a series of three articles, which explores artist involvement in early years settings. In this article I turn to academic theory, English early years policy and the inspiring practices of the pre-schools of Reggio Emilia to gain insights into how artists are involved in and collaborate with those in early years settings. In the second article Sarah Parsons early years lead at the Action for Children's Green Arc Children's Centre, and Jacqueline Slade director/artist of the children's theatre Soapbox theatre building on these understandings by discussing our collaboration during six 'Learning and Creating Workshops'. The final article presents parents, EY practitioners and students share their reflections, learning and experiences of being a part of the collaboration.

The arts and the early years tradition

The early years pioneers such as Steiner, Froebel, MacMillan, advocated that the arts contributed to children's holistic learning and growth (Kashin, 2018). Consequently, drawing, painting, clay (visual arts), rhyme, verse, song, movement (dance and music), storytelling, role play (drama/theatre) and design (architecture) have been and are still a feature of early years practice. More recently there has been recognition that when an artist is involved in an early years setting there are positive outcomes for children's learning (Arts Council, 2005). It is understood their involvement cultivates and sustains creative pedagogies in the setting and contributes to a positive relational environment for parents, practitioners and artists (Chappell et al, 2016). Therefore, the arts and working with artists are reflected in English early years curriculum frameworks.

Between 2000 and 2012, in the Curriculum Guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfEE 2000) and the Early Years Foundation Stage framework (EYFS) (DCSF 2008), there were explicit references to artist involvement in early years settings. The documents stated children should be provided 'opportunities to work alongside artists and other creative adults' (DfEE 2000, 117; DCSF 2008, 106), as well as making reference to the various art forms mentioned above. In subsequent versions of the EYFS (DfE, 2012, 2017, 2021) whilst there were references to the art forms there was not an explicit reference to artist involvement in settings. However, in the current EYFS programme of study for Expressive Arts and Design states 'children have regular opportunities to engage with the arts' (DfE, 2021: 10), which could be interpreted as practitioners providing children opportunity to work with artists when engaging with the arts.

The changes to English early years education policy, inconsistent funding for both sectors and uncertainty of the role of the artist (Petrie and Chambers, 2010), has led to 'an instructional potpourri' (Remer 2010, 82) of how artists are involved in settings. How the artist is involved in an early years setting will be shaped by practitioners' perceptions of the arts, children's learning and how the artist can contribute to the

learning process. In some contexts the artist is viewed as a member of the pedagogic team. In this collaboration artist and practitioners are partners in creating the pedagogic practices and the curriculum. In other contexts artist involvement can be viewed as filling a gap in the curriculum, professional development for practitioners, or as an entertainer to deliver an annual show (McLauchlan 2017, 139). In these collaborations there are fewer opportunities for practitioners and artists to reflect and construct the curriculum and pedagogic practices together.

To gain deeper insights in an early years setting's practices when an artist is a permanent member of the pedagogic team I turn to the practices of the pre-schools of Reggio Emilia. Whilst these practices have inspired artist involvement in early years settings across the globe (Churchill- Dower 2009) it is necessary to acknowledge the historical context that has shaped these practices.

The Reggio Emilia Approach

After the Second World War in the principality of Reggio Emilia, members of the local community (women and men) debated how they should spend the money they had from selling the military vehicles that had been left behind. The atrocities of the war motivated them to spend the money in a manner that would enable their children to create a different world. They discussed how the current education system required children to conform and obey. Instead the community wanted to create an education system and pedagogy that enabled the children to think, act for themselves and grow up intolerant to injustice or inequality (Dahlberg, 1995, cited Moss, 2002). The community's debate (and the money) led to the foundations of the pre-schools of Reggio Emilia.

Loris Malaguzzi (1920 – 1994), who was trained in both education and psychology, heard about the community's quest for a different education system. He believed the traditional pedagogy limited learning to certain knowledge, skills and behaviours. He used the metaphor of 'a funnel' to explain the traditional curriculum, which he argued '...narrow[ed] down what is too big into what is small' (cited in Edwards et al., 2011: 63). He joined the community in reversing the funnel effect of education to create a progressive pedagogy that expanded the possibilities for learning. In 1963 the first pre-school for children aged 3 to 6 years was open and in 1971 the first infant-toddler centre is founded for the youngest children between 0 and 3 years (Reggio Children; 2020).

Malaguzzi viewed the starting point for establishing and developing the pedagogy was the child, as he believed that 'things about children and for children are only learned from children' (1998: 51). Therefore, the image of the child that guided his and his colleagues practices, was one who is 'rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent and, most of all, connected to adults and other children' (in Penn, 1997: 117). Instead of the teachers delivering the curriculum knowledge, skills and behaviours to the children the role of the teacher is to listen to children's "100'

languages' (Malaguzzi: 2012), drawing on the children's theories, experiences, interests and feelings he and his colleagues constructed the curriculum.

Like the other early years pioneers Malaguzzi acknowledged the importance of the arts in education and believed an atelierista (artist) would be the 'guarantor of more complete educational processes' (Vecchi, 2010: 131). Including an atelierista would enhance the learning process by fostering 'the dance between cognitive, expressive, rational and imaginative' (Vecchi, 2010:131). These beliefs underpinned his vision for an atelierista (artist) being a permanent member of the preschools' pedagogic team (Gandini, 2012). The physical environment reflected the permanence of the atelierista, as the design of the pre-school building included an atelier (a studio) (Gandini 2012). Guided by the shared image of the child and drawing on their different perspectives and experiences Malaguzzi and his team created 'the pedagogy of relationships and listening' (Rinaldi, 2001:2).

During the process of co-constructing the pedagogy the atelierista and teachers are learning together. Vecchi, the atelierista at the Dianah preschool, recounts how learning together led to practices evolving. For instance, they initially planned programmes of study. To begin with the atelierista and teachers initiated a theme and would then follow the children's lead. Overtime, as the atelierista and teachers reflected and learnt together they built trust in the children and became confident in noticing the children's theories interests and feelings. Consequently the programmes of study were replaced with projects and the focus of the project was initiated by the children. Documentation was used to record the children's theories and learning during the project and also facilitated atelierista's and teachers' learning. The process of documentation, was a tool that enabled them to illuminate possible areas of experimentation with the children (Vecchi, 2010). Examples of projects are 'The Crowd' and 'The City and Rain' (Gandini, 2012).

Learning and Creating workshops a collaboration between artists, practitioners and lecturer

Sarah, Jacqueline and I did not believe we can take the practices of the preschools in Reggio Emilia and reproduce them in Plymouth. We did, however, draw on the approach, the philosophies of our early years pioneers and research to consider how we could create our collaboration. In the following article we share our experiences of working together.

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