

## Artistic enquiry in early childhood education.

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As Johnny prepares to move to 'big school' he reflects on his favourite day in Creche.



*Once upon a time there was a big delivery to the creche. We thought it was loads of people but we opened the cardboard box and it was a big fire engine bouncing castle with a door and seats. I sit in and drive the fire engine. Thomas and me were driving and everyone was in the back. It had wings and we could fly to different countries like Spain or France and we put out all the fires. All of Spain got on fire, so we got our hoses and saved the day.*

The story reflects wonderfully Malaguzzi's theory (Rinaldi 1993) that '*work and play, reality and fantasy, science and imagination, sky and earth, reason and dream are things that ... belong together*'. They all belong comfortably in Johnny's story and drawing – a story of reality and fantasy, of danger and courage, of evil and good, of individual and community, brought together seamlessly with real, factual knowledge, metaphor and imagination. It's a beautiful story, full of warmth, energy, companionship and heroism – a work of art.

This paper reviews the place of art in the early childhood curriculum. It draws on the metaphor of theatre to firstly describe the evolving understanding of education and learning that sets the stage for critical engagement with the arts for young children, it reconnects with the competencies, skills and dispositions of very young children who are the principle actors and finally reviews the performance possibilities, the experience of artists and educators working together, the questions raised and the opportunities going forward

### **The stage is set**

We have made some significant shifts in the way we understand education and learning in the early childhood sector. The organic nature of the sector's development has allowed us some flexibility in developing perspective and approach and the age of the children has relieved some of the pressure to perform to more school-like standards. Traditionally, in the sector, we have avoided teaching and focussed more on play and relationships, albeit driven largely by theories about what children need. The concept of need has been strong, coming from a very Piagetian view of stages of biological and cognitive development. We now know that the body and maybe some elements of cognition and logic may develop in somewhat universal stages but we also know that the mind is shaped in relationships and experiences and babies come into the world ready to search them out and engage wholeheartedly. This perspective can turn the tables so that we think of babies as the protagonists,

the active agents, who 'tenderize' (Jose Miquel de Angulo, personal communication 2014) their parents and generate in them the skills and dispositions to become wonderful collaborators in the creative process of constructing identity and belonging. This upturn changes the question from 'what do children need to become more like adults?' to 'what are the competencies, dispositions and drives that make young children such powerful learners and how can we sustain their energy, enthusiasm and skills?' How do we support children in the making of themselves and community? Now the concepts of enquiry, exploring, feeling, listening, developing multiple perspectives and ways of communicating take centre stage. There is an obvious role for the arts and artistic enquiry in this way of learning.

Aistear, the early childhood curriculum framework, in many ways reflects these shifts in understanding. It describes curriculum as emergent, enquiry led and play-based. Its aims, according to Aistear, are that children will have a feeling of well-being, a strong sense of identity and belonging and the dispositions and skills for communicating, exploring and thinking. These are learning goals that recognise the cultural and complex nature of learning and position children as active participants and drivers. We end up with a very different lens - shifting from what children are lacking and need to acquire to building on their innate and nature-endowed strengths for connecting with, contributing to and creating community.

Malaguzzi (Rinaldi 1993) tells us that children have '*a hundred languages, a hundred hands, a hundred thoughts, a hundred ways of thinking, of playing, of speaking*' but through our education system we steal ninety nine. The structures and drives for communicating through the languages of rhyme, music, movement and dance, story and drama and all their sub-dialects are there from the beginning. Dissanayake (2009) brings us back to birth and tells us that these arts are part of the first relationships, employed in the intimacy of mother- infant play. Others, drawing, painting, sculpting, building etc. follow close upon when we recognise the potential of the arts to give energy to children's natural capacity for creativity, communicating and thinking and exploring.

The stage is set for rethinking the potential of the arts and the role of artists in early childhood settings.

### **The actors are primed**

The actors are already primed. Research clearly tells us that the creative drive is a predisposition possessed by all children. Nature designs it so because creativity is essential for learning in early childhood. We just need to construct environments where it can show itself, grow and flourish.

What are these strengths that children have for communicating and exploring and thinking? Young (2015) suggests that they are born as **musicians**. Trevarthen's (2010) writing about infant musicality brings us again into the mother-infant space and the 'convivial traffic of fantasies' that fill it. He tells us that babies bring their natural musical aptitude to these interactions towards synchronising with their mothers. Pulse, beat, rhythm, feeling, timing, artful moving and 'intent participation' (Rogoff 1990) all combine to create coordinated exchanges full of coos, squeals, oohs and aahhs between them. We need to get in touch with this magic– to search for what has been so often overlooked and dismissed in our theories of learning. Trevarthen tells us that mother and infant share their intentions, interests and feelings by moving in sympathy with one another so that the 'felt me' becomes the 'felt we', reminiscent of an orchestra at work. Dessenayake (2009) compares these early interactions to jazz musicians, improvising and coordinating their contributions into a shared musical story. Stephen Mallock (1999) calls it 'Communicative Musicality' – and show that it is the

basis of intersubjectivity and consequently all learning. Trevarthen (2010) summarises saying that by means of these *conversational stories or dialogue....we come to live in a world in which we have access to meaning thousands of years old that are capable of linking ideas between people far apart in quite different circumstances*'. It is a creative process. Children are natural musicians - primed for communicating, exploring and thinking through music. It makes sense to fill childhood with musical experiences.

Egan (2013) tells us that we are born as **poets**. What can he mean? He explains that children have certain intellectual capacities, associated with poets, which are at their peak in the early years and decline thereafter. Those of you who work with young children know this. They are hyper sensitive to emotion in others, in stories, in relationships (Dunn 1987). They are primed to read emotion and trigger it in carers. Parents naturally respond and from the beginning, in their interactions, fill their voices and gestures with big expression and explicit emotion. Like poets, babies feel their way into the stories going on around them.

Like poets too, children have an easy ability to generate metaphors. Gardner and Winner (1978) found that this ability peaked at age 5. We can see in Johnny's story and drawing above how quickly children create metaphors for good and evil, for fear and bravery, for loss and love. These are abstract concepts that children may not name but they engage with them through story. Metaphor demands imagination and again the story above brings us in to a highly imaginative world. Do you think you could do this with such ease? Unlikely. The imagination is at its liveliest in early childhood because that's when it's needed most. Nature designs it so. Infants need the flexibility, creativity and energy that an active imagination brings in order to quickly come to terms with language, society and the vast world around them. This 'finding a place in the world', Bruner (1999: 176) tells us, '*is ultimately an act of imagination*'. Alison Gopnik (2014) tells us '*from the perspective of human evolution, our great capacity is not just that we learn about the world. The thing that really makes us distinctive is that we can imagine other ways that the world could be....*'. Imagination, says Ken Robinson, is the extraordinary human power. These great minds of our times are at one in this. Each and every one of us, as everyday educators, can witness it each day. Think of a 2 year old's ability to talk, run, sing and dance and to '*assert their will, argue, amuse, annoy, befriend, rile, insist and ask questions*' (Grey 2013). Think of the 4 year old and their ability to integrate real life, fantasy and imaginative stories. Do you think they get more or less imaginative as they get older? Do you think they are less observant than you are as an adult? Children may face challenges in using language or staying with the task or following logical sequence but when it comes to imagination, metaphor, narrative and affective understanding, they have the advantage. Their investigations are tireless. Long after the adult wants to give up, they want to do it again and again. These are the capacities of poets, according to Egan. The central fact of their minds, he tells us, is not their biological nature but their poetic nature.

We know that children are researchers on a quest for meaning (Trevarthen 2009). They are meaning making machines – intent readers of minds and students of every gesture, tone, subtle change, mood and intention. This is all data that they use to co-construct stories that explain the world. Bruner (1996, 2007) has championed the role of stories in human meaning making. It is, he tells us, by telling stories and by being within stories that people make sense of their world and their place within it. Stories are our human way for ordering reality, creating possibilities and sharing knowledge. Again, Johnny's story exemplifies this. We see this love of story in children's dialogues, drawings, constructions, songs and dance. Nowhere is the role of story more explicit than in their play. This is the space where they can reflect on and share their experiences. They construct stories together – stories that bring together their shared experiences and their imaginative, creative ways of coordinating them.

## **The show must go on**

The Arts in Education Portal has begun to document the range of arts projects happening in early childhood settings around the country. Local Arts Officers, Arts Centres, Arts groups and agencies, individual artists and early childhood educators have been proactive in developing opportunities for children to engage. Early Childhood Ireland too has worked with a range of artists over the last few years in early childhood settings. Ivica Simic from Croatia has shared his theatre with Irish children, Hannah Lefevre has brought story to movement. Our Tiny voices project with Common Ground has developed approaches to enquiry through music with preschool children while our projects with Kids Own, both Being and Belonging and the Lullaby Project, have worked with babies and toddlers to develop a space for artistic enquiry in their lives. In the Lullaby Project, a visual artist and a musician worked with educators to create a simple, uncluttered space to which they introduced natural open-ended materials such as wooden bowls, scarves, sand and shells. The sounds of the big bass, the harp, the duckcaller became integrated parts of the surroundings. All combined to create an ethos of listening to children and allowing the time, space, materials and relationships for them to engage with the wonder of the world. In the Being and Belonging project artists worked with parent and toddler groups - creating a range of experiences from the emotional, sensorial, adventurous 'going on a bear hunt' and the 'touching rolling bending twisting and squeezing' of clay to wallowing in water and messy play and dramatised story telling with paint. Both projects were beautifully documented to capture children in enquiry: 'What can I do? How does it feel? Do you see what I see?'

Artists and Educators are enquiring too. Engaging with a new project and negotiating a new approach is always a time for our own professional reflection? What do we all want from this project? What do we bring? How do we perceive and interpret what's happening? Artists raise interesting questions. What does the artist bring that is extra? What do children stand to gain? Educators bring questions. What is the relationship between children's play and the arts? How do we make artistic enquiry part of our pedagogy? For Early Childhood Ireland and its members play is a deeply reflective, creative space for children. For us the question is: How can the artist help us to develop the arts as other languages of enquiry – other ways of exploring and expressing that bring new perspectives?

We are so grateful to the many artists we have worked with for the invitation to look and listen again – to tune in again to children – to create artistic experiences with them - but now with all of our senses. What are the children saying? What are their questions? How are they managing? What 'possible selves' and 'possible worlds' are they constructing? Artists help us on our journey towards creating enquiry communities with children. Children's voices are strengthened through creative opportunities for expression and at the same time artists carry these voices into their own work. Children become more visible as contributors. Educators and artists have the capacity to be complementary and mutually enhancing. We need to be more proactive in creating opportunities.

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