

Evaluating The Impact Of The Early Years Arts Initiative - Working In Partnership

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An innovative new partnership between The Arts Council Northern Ireland and NIPPA, the Early Years Organisation, has been established to provide greater access to the creative arts for young children. This paper explores the professional dialogue and partnership developed between voluntary and statutory sectors, and between teachers, leaders, artists, families and participatory communities. The research paradigm is practitioner action research. Key findings and recommendations for change and improvement in practice are advocated emerging from data collected through questionnaires, observation and documentation of children's work. The findings of this qualitative research reveal that children of pre-school age benefit from working in partnership with artists, teachers, leaders and parents, leading to increased physical and emotional well-being. Findings also highlight that significant aspects of collaborative working with partners include, sharing of good practice between statutory and voluntary sectors in early years, inclusion and the creation of a culture of listening to children. This research stresses the importance of recognising and valuing young children as strong, competent and visible in their communities.

The concept of creativity is complex, and according to Moyles (1989) to define the term is as difficult as defining play itself. In many pre-school settings, any activities where children are gluing, sticking, cutting, painting, dressing-up or singing are often referred to as being creative. This ill-defined and vague interpretation is not really acceptable if the quality of creative learning through play offered to our youngest children is to improve.

Young children exhibit a natural creativity, curiosity and an eagerness to learn and make sense of the world around them. Early years education has a crucial role to play in developing children's creativity and highlights the importance of listening to the voice of the child regarding his or her own creative experiences as enshrined by Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989). Bringing about change, embraces the inclusive approach embedded in listening to young children (Lancaster, 2003).

The research carried out in this study supports the promotion of a listening culture. It highlights the important role played by the arts in supporting children's participation in promoting their experiences, views and concerns, and the significance of listening to them in terms of the provision of appropriate creative experiences. As Rinaldi (2006: 65) suggests *"Listening that takes the individual out of anonymity, that legitimates us, gives*

us visibility". Through the Early Years Arts Initiative projects, children were made visible in their communities with a number of exhibitions and performances of their work.

Throughout the study confidentiality was maintained and no significant ethical dilemmas encountered. Permission for photographs was obtained; however Clark and Moss (2001) draw attention to the fact that listening in on the lives of young children may be liberating but may also be an unwelcome intrusion.

Emanating from the Mosaic Approach (Clark and Moss, 2001), a range of imaginative methodologies was employed which did not rely entirely on the written word. The Mosaic Approach, outlined by Clark and Moss (2001), has been inspired by the pedagogical documentation emphasised in the Reggio Emilia pre-schools, using a rich combination of data drawn together to form a "*new platform for listening*" (Clark and Moss, 2001: 12). Documentation according to Kinney, *et al.* (2002) goes further and deeper than observation and it was therefore chosen as a method of data collection, to record the experiences of the children as told by them.

Data reveals that one of the most significant aspects of the collaboration with the artists working in the settings was that practitioners were stepping back and allowing the children to take the lead. Creativity was seen as the axis on which many of the projects revolved, with the children at the centre. As a result of working on the projects, there was a commitment to explore the child's true potential and to recognise the value of children's ideas and initiatives which emerged spontaneously, rather than have them imposed by adults.

The world renowned Reggio Emilia approach to early years education views children as individuals who can act and think for themselves. The child is seen as rich, strong, competent and powerful. Young children are valued and respected. The Reggio educators strongly believe in children with unlimited potential, who take great pleasure and responsibility for their own learning (Valentine, 1999; Malaguzzi, 1998; Abbott and Nutbrown, 2001). In the pre-schools of Reggio Emilia, as children's first educators, parents are afforded a high priority. Here, it is felt that to describe partnership with parents as the link between home and school is to undervalue what really takes place. As Pearson and Woodbridge (2001: 6) suggest, "*It is not so much that families take part in the life of the school, but that they are the school*". Beetlestone (1998) believes that benefit for creative learning experiences can be gained when parents share their children's experiences, and are willing to support them.

The outcome of consulting with parents not only raises issues surrounding parental partnership, but also the role of creativity in the early years curriculum. Often there

appears to be an expectation by adults working with young children that parents look for evidence of creative learning to be sent home. The findings of this research however indicate that for parents, the taking home of paintings, models and junk art is the least important outcome of creative learning. Contrasting with the presumption that parents expect to have the results of creative learning sent home, the majority of parents regarded enjoyment and having fun as the most important outcomes of creative learning followed by the acquisition of new skills.

Nutbrown (1996) highlights the important and distinctive feature of all Reggio pre-schools, the inclusion in the teaching staff of a qualified artist. Similarly, the Arts Council England (2005: 22) recommends that to provide all children with the best opportunity for effective creative development *"practitioners should give particular attention to opportunities to work alongside artists and other creative adults"*.

The aim of the Early Years Initiative endorses these views, with the scheme supporting partnership projects between voluntary and statutory organisations/groups within educational catchment areas to extend the creative abilities of young children through interaction with creative practitioners. The out workings of projects supported through the scheme should be evidenced through:

- The development and application of strategies in Early Years settings by teachers, classroom assistants, play workers and artists for the promotion of creativity through the arts;
- Professional dialogue and partnership established between the voluntary and statutory sectors and between teachers, classroom assistants, play workers and artists with a view to enriching the learning environment for children aged three to seven years;
- The identification of a group of arts practitioners with Early Years training who can develop creative work with children aged three to seven years;
- The provision of information and support for parents with a view to their encouragement of children's creativity;
- Models of good practice in Early Years settings, with documentation of outcomes to be available to others (Arts Council N. Ireland, 2005).

Training, mentoring and support for artists and practitioners involved in the scheme was provided through site visits, cluster training sessions and participation on the NIPPA accredited art and design course "Supporting Young Children's Creativity".

Sharp (2001) indicates that little research has been conducted on the impact working with an artist has on young children's creativity. Further research is necessary, but the results of this study have already begun to have an impact on the early years sector both in

Northern Ireland and internationally by beginning a cross-sectional dialogue, which is contributing to the wider debate around arts and creativity and to future policy developments.

According to Roy (1995), it is when those who are most directly involved in the process of change are helping to create the solution, that the barriers to implementation are removed. The results from this study suggest that the practitioners involved are open to change, and are able to see benefits of working collaboratively, indicating that they were willing to make changes to improve existing practice to support children's creative learning. As a result of working in partnership data revealed:

- From the experience of working with artists, children exhibited an increased enthusiasm for creative work *especially the boys*.
- The projects made a significant contribution to the learning experiences planned for the children by developing and extending social and emotional skills, language, confidence and self-esteem. Children were also provided with opportunities to focus on exploring their environment and engaging in experiences which were relevant to them.
- As a result of working with the artists, staff developed documentation skills, using photographs and by recording work in progress. They gained an understanding that the process is more important than the product, became more willing to be led by the children and developed confidence in new skills such as printing, weaving, clay and plaster work, felting, and cutting/tearing techniques.
- The most significant aspect of the collaboration with partners was good communication and teamwork, an exchanging of views and sharing of good practice. Also important was collaborative working between nursery classes and Primary One children and between voluntary and statutory sectors.
- Implications for future work identified a willingness to involve parents and implement new skills and a review of planned learning experiences and planned in-service days to share and build on experiences. Further training and support was also identified as a need for staff.

This study has provided an opportunity for evaluation and reflection. It suggests that a multi-disciplinary approach and recognition of the importance of viewing early years creative experiences from different perspectives highlights not only ways of thinking creatively, but also possibilities for creative early years practice.

In line with NIPPA's strategic and operational plan, theme two sets out the objective to ensure that the organisation is at the forefront of best practice. Objectives include maintaining, developing and implementing a range of models of best practice within the early childhood sector, and ensuring that the voice of the child is at the heart of service

development and policy formation. The findings from this research support NIPPA's strategic plan. Since 1999, NIPPA has been involved in the World Forum on Early Years Care and Education, resulting in networking opportunities with practitioners and professionals on a worldwide basis. On-going professional dialogue with the educators in Reggio Emilia continues to strengthen the goal to learn from best practice internationally.

Craft (2002) believes that change comes through taking risks and argues that change is not only at the core of creativity itself, but also at the heart of growth and development. Involvement in this new initiative allows artists, staff, children and parents to take risks with creative learning. The child is able to be an independent learner and a researcher and to be strong, capable and visible in the community.

This paper therefore culminates in the following recommendations which are to:

- Continue to lobby for further funding from bodies such as The Arts Council Northern Ireland to take the project forward.
- Encourage the training of practitioners in listening to the voice of the child.
- Continue to develop resources to support practitioners in the areas of documentation.
- Continue to support and train artists and practitioners to work collaboratively to share skills across disciplines.
- Develop and support a network of artists trained to work in early years.
- Promote opportunities for development through international exchange.

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