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## The Place of the Arts in Early Childhood Learning and Development

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Perspective two:

## The Place of the Arts in Early Childhood Learning and Development

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Dr Geraldine French  
July 2013

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*Many of the things we need can wait. The child cannot. Right now is the time his bones are being formed, his blood is being made and his senses are being developed. To him we cannot answer 'Tomorrow'. His name is 'Today'.*

Gabriela Mistral<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

This paper has been commissioned by Arts Council Ireland to inform the development of a national strategy for early childhood arts in Ireland. The paper is based on contemporary thinking and knowledge of child psychology, early learning and development and childhood studies, in particular the theoretical principles and pedagogical approaches to early childhood art-based learning.

It begins with an exploration of the concept of pedagogy. International research on the importance of effective pedagogy in early childhood education and care (ECEC) is then discussed setting out the evidence and rationale for public policy attention to the area of the arts in early childhood. Pedagogical organisation or framing is then considered along with the underpinning concepts of supporting children's creativity, thinking and language relevant to the practice of early childhood arts. The importance of interactions between novices and experts (adults and learners) is highlighted throughout and specific interaction strategies thought to enhance children's learning are identified. The principles underpinning early learning and development in relation to how children learn are then outlined. Finally, drawing in part from the literature on effective pedagogy, and the principles underpinning early childhood education, contemporary perspectives on children and those who work with very young children (incorporating both early childhood artists and early childhood educators) are presented.

While acknowledging that the field of early childhood education and care is evolving in Ireland with the consequent need for the professional development of the sector the term early childhood educator is employed. This shift in terminology from the more traditional term 'practitioner' is influenced by Amelia Gambetti<sup>2</sup> of the Reggio Emilia schools in Northern Italy who highlighted that to concentrate on the word 'practice' and avoid the word 'teacher' or 'educator' is to remove the theory of education and pedagogy from the practice. In this paper the term early childhood educator is used to emphasise the educative nature of the role, to foreground that children are learning from birth and to inspire the professional development of the sector.

A socio-cultural understanding of children's learning is adopted to inform this paper, predicated on the dynamic nature of the approach and the emphasis on children learning through interactions with others. Since children learn with the support of others, early childhood artists and educators are thus challenged to take a proactive role in children's learning and in their pedagogical practice in early childhood education and art settings.

<sup>1</sup> Mistral, G. (1948). *His name is today*.

<sup>2</sup> Gambetti, A. (2010). *How can our daily experiences with young children inform planning and policy making for Early Childhood Education and Care*. Regional Seminar hosted by the National Children's Nurseries Association. Held on April 29th, in the Clock Tower, Malborough Street, Dublin.

## WHAT IS PEDAGOGY?

In the context of early childhood education, a commonly used definition of pedagogy is the practice, the art, the science, or the craft of teaching.<sup>3, 4, 5</sup> Moyles, Adams and Musgrave<sup>6</sup> represent pedagogy as a more reflective act, encompassing both the act of instruction and the ability to discuss and reflect on it. Pedagogy therefore involves *"the principles, theories, perceptions and challenges that inform and shape it"*.<sup>7</sup> Pedagogy, in this sense, connects the role of an early childhood educator and artist with personal, ethical, cultural and community values, the curriculum and outside influences. This definition complements a socio-cultural understanding, depicting pedagogy in the early years as operating not only from *"a shared frame of reference (a mutual learning encounter) between the educator, the young child and his/her family"*<sup>8</sup>, but also the cultural context of the educator and the artist.

There is one key element missing in the definitions above; the dialogical and relational nature of pedagogy between one human being and the other. The concept of relational pedagogy in ECEC has been elucidated by Papatheodorou and Moyles.<sup>9</sup> Relational pedagogy focuses on the connections between people, ideas and places and the impact of these relationships on education, educators and learners. This concept draws, in part, from Freire and other progressive educators who strongly oppose education systems which focus on transmission of knowledge which is disconnected from the experiences of the learner. Freire<sup>10</sup> described education as a dialogue, which goes beyond deepening understanding between people. Such dialogue cannot take place without love for mankind and the world; *"love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself"*. True dialogue where each person has an equal voice, without domination of one over the other, is marked by humility, faith in man's abilities, hope, mutual trust and critical thinking. Relational pedagogy places communication and interactions at the core of educational practice and underpins both social, cognitive and therefore creative development.<sup>11</sup>

Relational pedagogy is closer to the concept of pedagogy in early childhood that has evolved in those countries who inherited a social pedagogical tradition, such as the Nordic and Central European communities. As outlined in *Starting Strong II* the pedagogue embraces a holistic view of children. According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), *"This is not the child only of emotions – the psycho-therapeutical approach; nor only of the body – the medical or health approach; nor only of the mind – the traditional teaching approach"*.<sup>12</sup> For the pedagogue, these are inter-connected elements of each child's life, not compartments needing to be addressed separately. But this is not simply a philosophical ideal.

<sup>3</sup> Watkins, C. & Mortimore, P. (1999). Pedagogy: What do we know? In P. Mortimore (Ed.). *Understanding pedagogy and its impact on learning* (pp. 1–19). London: Chapman.

<sup>4</sup> Siraj-Blatchford, I. (2004). Quality teaching in the early years. In A. Anning, J. Cullen, & M. Flear (Eds.). *Early childhood education: Society and culture* (pp. 137–148). London: Sage Publications Ltd.

<sup>5</sup> Papatheodorou, T. (2009). Exploring relational pedagogy. In T. Papatheodorou & J. Moyles (Eds.). *Learning together in the early years: Exploring relational pedagogy* (pp. 3–18). Oxon: Routledge.

<sup>6</sup> Moyles, J., Adams, S., & Musgrave, A. (2002). *Study of pedagogical effectiveness in early learning*. Research Report No. 363. London: Department for Education and Skills.

<sup>7</sup> Op cite, p.5.

<sup>8</sup> Op cite, p.5.

<sup>9</sup> Papatheodorou, T. & Moyles, J. (Eds.). (2009). *Learning together in the early years: Exploring relational pedagogy*. Oxon: Routledge.

<sup>10</sup> Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, pp. 77–78.

<sup>11</sup> Papatheodorou, T. & Moyles, J. (Eds.). (2009). *Learning together in the early years: Exploring relational pedagogy*. Oxon: Routledge.

<sup>12</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2006). *Starting strong II: Early childhood education and care*. Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, p.59.

Bowman, Donovan and Burns provide research evidence from the US that early childhood programmes “*must attend to cognitive, social and emotional development simultaneously*” in order to have a positive impact.<sup>13</sup> Young children will be enabled to learn more effectively if they are anchored by the emotional support, respect and acceptance of a nurturing adult.

Pedagogy also relates to the dual role of educator and learner. Watkins and Mortimore<sup>14</sup> cogently identified pedagogy as any activity consciously designed by one individual to contribute to learning in another. Thus, the educator is a learner and the learner is an educator. These dual roles reflect the discussion above in relation to the reciprocity of participants in learning encounters<sup>15</sup>, combined with equality and mutual trust of participants.<sup>16</sup> Rogoff<sup>17</sup>, in a discussion on adults as experts facilitating novices’ learning, focuses on interactions between individuals of varying expertise. She provides a useful concept to consider the reciprocal nature of teaching and learning. She refers to expert and novice in relation “*to the activity in question, not absolute designations*”.<sup>18</sup> In the context of children’s learning, children and adults therefore are not on different sides, but can collaborate in varying responsibilities and roles and become a community of learners. Children can be experts and adults novices.

Pedagogy defined in this way is a dynamic, interactive and collaborative process. This process should be underpinned by trust, love and care, reflection, mutual respect, and understanding. Educators, artists and learners/experts and novices engage with each other in mutual learning encounters integrated within the socio-cultural activities of the participants. But why is pedagogy, a term traditionally associated with primary teaching, considered important in early childhood? The answer is addressed in the next section.

<sup>13</sup> Bowman, B., Donovan, S. & Burns, S., eds., (2001). *Eager to Learn: Educating our Preschoolers*. Committee on Early Childhood Pedagogy, National Research Council. Washington, DC: National Academy Press, p.58.

<sup>14</sup> Watkins, C. & Mortimore, P. (1999). Pedagogy: What do we know? In P. Mortimore (Ed.). *Understanding pedagogy and its impact on learning* (pp. 1–19). London: Chapman.

<sup>15</sup> Moyles, J., Adams, S., & Musgrave, A. (2002). *Study of pedagogical effectiveness in early learning*. Research Report No. 363. London: Department for Education and Skills.

<sup>16</sup> Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Harmondsworth: Penguin

<sup>17</sup> Rogoff, B. (1998). Cognition as a collaborative process. In D. Kuhn & R. Siegler (Eds.). *Handbook of Child Psychology* (pp. 679-744; 5th ed.). New York: John Wiley.

<sup>18</sup> Op cite, p.699.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF EFFECTIVE PEDAGOGY IN ECEC

An ambitious anti-poverty early intervention programme called Sure Start was established in the United Kingdom, opening its first centre in 1999. It concentrated on early education and care in areas of poverty and socio-economic disadvantage. It was established as a result of the findings of a Comprehensive Spending Review<sup>19</sup> commissioned by the Labour government. In this review the impact of high quality ECEC was found in all social groups but was most significant in children living with poverty. Parallel to that, two significant research projects relating to effective early education were funded by the UK Department for Education and Skills (DfES). With their focus on the identification of the components of effective pedagogy for young children, they serve as a useful foundation for this paper. These components are equally relevant to early childhood artists and educators.

The first research project, Effective Provision for Pre-school Education (EPPE), was a longitudinal study which began in 1997. It aimed to investigate the types of early childhood education and care provision which were most effective in promoting children's progress and development.<sup>20</sup> The resulting evidence was based on 141 randomly selected early childhood centres, providing ECEC for a total of 2,800 three and four year old children in six local authorities in England and in excess of 300 children cared for in homes. The study demonstrated that high quality early childhood education does make a significant difference for all children in terms of attainment for those cohorts in centre-based education. The greatest gains were found for children who were identified as disadvantaged based on a range of one or more indicators, including: English was not their first language; they lived in a family of three or more children; they had a low birth weight; their mother had no educational qualifications; one parent was unemployed; and they grew up in a single parent household.<sup>21</sup>

The EPPE study also suggested that families who are disadvantaged can provide a supportive learning environment with good learning outcomes for their children. The EPPE project found that it was what the parents *did* (for example playing with children, reading stories, engaging in creative arts experiences) that significantly influenced children's learning outcomes, and not their socio-economic status based on the indicators of disadvantage above. Likewise, in the settings it was what educators *did* (providing rich early learning experiences, meeting individual needs, and especially interacting meaningfully with children) that made the significant differences to children's outcomes.<sup>22</sup>

The findings from the EPPE study formed the basis of a second comprehensive, rigorous research project Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY).<sup>23</sup> The researchers employed the children's outcome data from the EPPE study in relation to academic, social and dispositional learning to determine effective settings. Intensive case studies were then conducted in 12 of the most effective settings and two

<sup>19</sup> Comprehensive Spending Review. (1998). *Cross departmental review of provision for young children*. Supporting papers Volume 1 & Volume 2. London: Her Majesty's Treasury.

<sup>20</sup> Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I., Taggart, B., Elliot, K. (2003). *The effective provision of pre-school education (EPPE) project: Findings from the pre-school period*. Brief No: RBX15-03. London: Department for Education and Skills.

<sup>21</sup> Siraj-Blatchford, I. (2004). Educational disadvantage in the early years: How do we overcome it? Some lessons from research. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 12(2), 5-20.

<sup>22</sup> Op cite

<sup>23</sup> Siraj-Blatchford, I., Sylva, K., Muttock, S, Gilden, R. & Bell, D. (2002). *Researching effective pedagogy in the early years*. Research Report No. 356. London: Department for Education and Skills.

recommended reception classes. As a result the most effective pedagogical strategies to support the attainment, progress and development of children were identified. The key findings of the REPEY project relevant to this paper were that the pedagogy in the most effective settings was characterised by:

- an equal emphasis on social and cognitive development, where both are seen as complementary;
- educator knowledge and understanding of child development and learning, and providing appropriate cognitive challenge;
- strategic planning for a wide range of curriculum experiences; and
- the quality of adult-child verbal interactions through ‘sustained shared thinking’, open-ended questioning and extension of children’s thoughts.<sup>24</sup>

High quality education and care is ensured by a number of factors, one of which is the quality of the educators. High quality educators are responsive and sensitive to the individual children’s needs, and stimulate the cognitive development of the children.<sup>25</sup> The structural environment is also significant. High quality structural environments contain high staff-child ratios, small group size, ongoing and professional training.<sup>26</sup> The physical learning environment contributes to quality early education when it is aesthetically pleasing with a rich variety of materials which stimulate curiosity and exploration, carefully arranged and stored for accessibility in interest/learning areas.<sup>27, 28, 29</sup> Furthermore, it is considered that “*the single most important determinant of high quality ECEC is the interaction between children and staff*”.<sup>30</sup>

A comprehensive study conducted in the United States was designed to identify the factors that make the greatest difference to young children’s outcomes.<sup>31</sup> The purpose of the study was to make recommendations to policy makers on where to best direct resources. Consistent with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation and the REPEY study, the data revealed that goals for early education may only be achievable if programmes ensure high-quality teacher-child interactions.<sup>32</sup> The findings above suggest that a focus on the interactions of early childhood artists with children is important.

Well-designed early education programmes are shown to engender benefits for the participants themselves, government and society.<sup>33</sup> These benefits are reported to

<sup>24</sup> Op cite

<sup>25</sup> Op cite

<sup>26</sup> Op cite

<sup>27</sup> Hohmann, M., Weikart, D. & Epstein, A. (2008). *Educating young children*, (2nd ed.). USA: The High/Scope Press.

<sup>28</sup> Schweinhart, L.J., Montie, J., Xiang, Z., Barnett, W.S., Belfield, C.R., & Nores, M. (2004). Lifetime effects: The High/Scope Perry Preschool study through age 40. *Monographs of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation*, 14. Ypsilanti, Michigan: High/Scope Press.

<sup>29</sup> Siraj-Blatchford, I., Sylva, K., Muttock, S, Gilden, R. & Bell, D. (2002). *Researching effective pedagogy in the early years*. Research Report No. 356. London: Department for Education and Skills

<sup>30</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation. (2006). *Strong Foundations: Early childhood care and education*. Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation p.6.

<sup>31</sup> Burchinal, M., Vandergrift, N., Pianta, R., & Mashburn, A. (2010). Threshold analysis of association between child care quality and child outcomes for low income children in pre-kindergarten programs. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 25(2), 166–176.

<sup>32</sup> In the REPEY study ‘pedagogical’ interactions are the precise cognitive or social interactions actively undertaken by educators in face to face encounters with individual children (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002).

<sup>33</sup> Karoly, L.A. & Bigelow, J.H. (2005). *The economics of investing in universal preschool education in California*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.

outweigh the costs.<sup>34</sup> "A number of longitudinal studies have shown rates of return from \$4 to \$17 for every dollar invested" over the life cycle.<sup>35</sup> The rates of return to the same investment made in a person of a given ability at different ages are demonstrated in Figure 1 below.

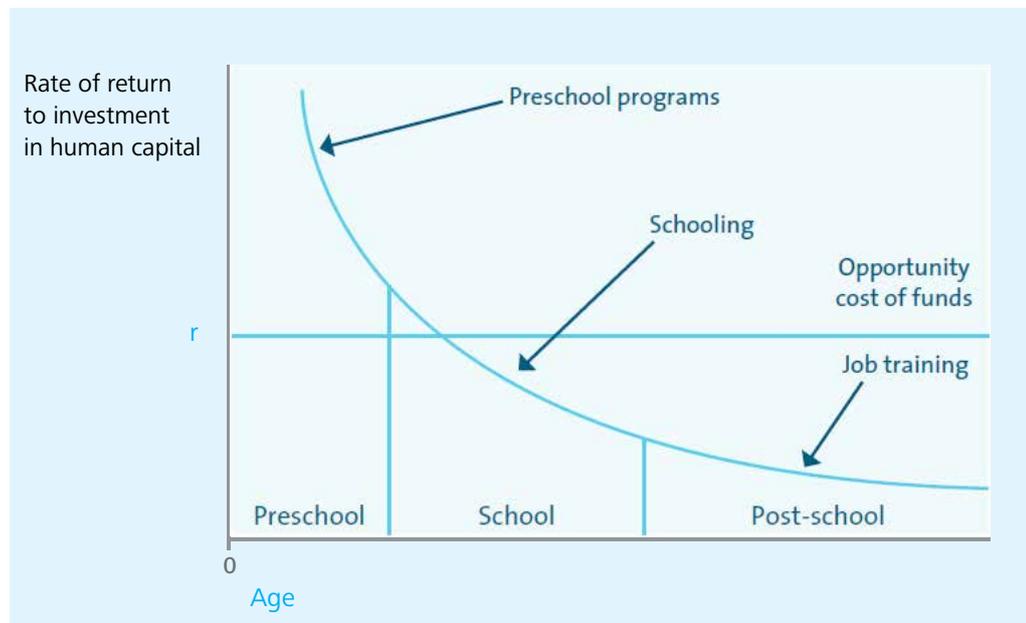


Fig. 1: Rates of return over the life cycle<sup>36</sup>

The case has been made in Ireland for "targeting expenditure where returns are greatest".<sup>37</sup> This has resulted in an unprecedented policy focus on education and care for children in the years before compulsory schooling in Ireland. This policy focus is warranted. We now know without question that high quality early childhood education and care reaps measurable gains in thinking and social skills for all children. Early childhood arts therefore have a significant role to play in children's learning and development. However, optimal conditions for children's early creative learning and development must be supported.

<sup>34</sup> Heckman, J. (2006). *The economics of investing in children*. UCD Geary Institute, Research Analysis Evidence, Policy Briefing No. 1. Dublin: University College Dublin.

<sup>35</sup> National Economic and Social Council. (2009). *Well-being matters: A social report for Ireland*. NESC Report No. 119, Vol II. Dublin: National Social and Economic Council, p.24.

<sup>36</sup> Cunha, F., Heckman, J., Lochmer, L. & Masterov, D.V. (2005). 'Interpreting the evidence in Life Cycle Skill Formation'. *NBER Working Paper No. 11331*. Cambridge, MA: NBER.

<sup>37</sup> National Competitiveness Council. (2009). *Statement on education and training*, Dublin: National Competitiveness Council.

## PEDAGOGICAL ORGANISATION

In the REPEY study a distinction was made between two particular aspects of pedagogy adopted by educators in early childhood settings, pedagogical framing and pedagogical interactions.<sup>38</sup> These aspects are equally relevant to early childhood artists.

Pedagogical framing may be interpreted as curriculum management<sup>39</sup> and organisation.<sup>40</sup> Pedagogical organisation involves the creation of the conditions in which children's learning and development is enhanced. Taking a broad approach, pedagogical organisation involves the educators' (and artists') own stance in relation to their role and identity as educators (and artists), their views of children's learning and how they should support that learning.

Organising for effective pedagogy involves 'behind the scenes' work – arranging the learning environment in such a way as to promote children learning through, for example, discovery, exploration and collaboration. It also involves planning, providing appropriate materials, other resources and assessment.<sup>41</sup> Pedagogical interactions are the precise cognitive or social interactions actively undertaken by educators in face to face encounters with individual children. It is acknowledged that both pedagogical organisation and pedagogical interactions are required to effectively enhance children's learning.<sup>42, 43</sup>

The challenge for early childhood educators (and artists) is to conduct the first (pedagogical organisation) competently in order to enable the second (pedagogical interactions). Furthermore, as articulated earlier, in this model pedagogical organisation involves more than planning. It is a relational act involving the identity, the values and the theories of the educators (and artists) and their views of children and early learning. Pedagogical organisation involves an ability to be responsive. It is informed by knowledge of child development and learning and the curriculum.

The literature suggests that effective pedagogy in ECEC is more than simply providing resources. It is more than knowledge of the curriculum content underpinned by theory and experience. Effective practice requires adopting strategies that enable learning to take place and it is more than the interactive process itself. It is fundamentally a human, nurturing, dialogic, respectful, responsive, reflective and collaborative act on the part of the educator (and artist) encompassing principles, values and personal theories about learning. In high quality ECEC settings educators (and therefore artists) think about what has occurred in practice and why. Educators consider whether children's learning and development could be enhanced and how that is to be achieved. Reflection and planning is at the core of practice.<sup>44</sup> As evidenced by Earlyarts early childhood arts experiences encompass and promote all areas of learning and development including numeracy, literacy and language. Those experiences, however, must be of high quality.

<sup>38</sup> Siraj-Blatchford, I., Sylva, K., Muttock, S, Gilden, R. & Bell, D. (2002). *Researching effective pedagogy in the early years*. Research Report No. 356. London: Department for Education and Skills

<sup>39</sup> Wells. G. (1985). *Language, learning and education*. Berkshire: NFER-Nelson.

<sup>40</sup> National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. (2009a). *Learning and developing through interactions*. Dublin: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

<sup>41</sup> Siraj-Blatchford, I., Sylva, K., Muttock, S, Gilden, R. & Bell, D. (2002). *Researching effective pedagogy in the early years*. Research Report No. 356. London: Department for Education and Skills

<sup>42</sup> Op cite.

<sup>43</sup> Wells. G. (1985). *Language, learning and education*. Berkshire: NFER-Nelson.

<sup>44</sup> Godhard. T. (1995). In preface to *Staff-child interactions: A Vygotskyan perspective*. M. Fleer. Canberra: Australian Early Childhood Association.

## UNDERPINNING CONCEPTS OF PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICE

Creative arts experiences provide the context for children's holistic learning and development. Children's learning and development is underpinned by ideas of guided participation, intersubjectivity, co-construction and meaning making, joint attention and collaboration. These terms are defined below; although each is dependent on the other and some interpretations overlap.

- Rogoff<sup>45</sup> has introduced the concept of *guided participation*. It refers to the process by which children acquire problem-solving capabilities and skills through their active participation in meaningful experiences alongside parents, educators, artists or more advanced peers. An example of this would be making a card for a friend in hospital or making play dough. It may include scaffolding, modelling, open-ended questioning (see later on in this paper), and the many ways educators and artists structure the environment, experiences and engage with the children. For example, adults and children singing familiar nursery rhymes. All sing together:

*'Incy, wincy spider, climbed up the water spout,  
Down came the rain and...*

The adult pauses and lets the children finish the line  
*Washed the spider out'*

- Underpinning the processes of guided participation is the concept of *intersubjectivity*. This is the process by which two individuals achieve a joint focus on a problem, item of interest or creative process. Schaffer<sup>46</sup> puts it in colloquial terms when he describes achieving intersubjectivity as being 'on the same wavelength'. There is a mutual engagement with the understanding and feelings of the other person. Knowledge or understanding is not transmitted or imposed on passive recipients; it is a two-way process. For example, you might have a conversation with a three year old about 'where does the sun go at the end of the day'? You may both have different understanding of what happens but are mutually interested to continue the conversation.
- Children are constantly on a quest to seek meaning in the world around them. *Co-construction* and *meaning-making* involve educators and artists becoming aware of children's knowledge and understanding, and engaging with that; developing excellent communication skills and having the interest and enthusiasm to discover more about the child's topic of interest.

Echoing Rogoff's concepts of expert and novice, children's knowledge (for example of Halloween) is acknowledged as expert from their experience and as valid as the adults.<sup>47</sup> Jacoby and Ochs<sup>48</sup> refer to co-construction as 'the joint creation of a form, interpretation... emotion, or other culturally meaningful

<sup>45</sup> Rogoff, B. (1990). *Apprenticeship in thinking: Cognitive development in a social context*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 8.

<sup>46</sup> Schaffer, H. R. (2006). *Key concepts in developmental psychology*. London: Sage Publications, p.155.

<sup>47</sup> Jordan, B. (2009). Scaffolding learning and co-constructing understanding. In A. Anning, J. Cullen, and M. Flear (Eds.). *Early childhood education: Society and culture* (2nd ed.) (pp.39-52). London: Sage Publications.

<sup>48</sup> Jacoby, S & Ochs, E. (1995). Co-construction: An introduction. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 28(3), 171–183, p.171.

reality'. The focus is on developing intersubjectivity, rather than achieving a specific learning outcome or direction which may exist in the mind of an adult. Children learn through collaboration with others. For example, adults (or children) documenting what children are doing through digital film, photographs or digital voice recordings and, with children's agreement and interest, both parties observing, listening and communicating about what was documented together.

- In order to develop intersubjectivity there must be a shared focus of attention.<sup>49</sup> Schaffer focussed on the kinds of interactions, or 'joint involvement episodes', that appeared to him to play a particularly significant role in progressing development.<sup>50</sup> According to Schaffer, *joint attention* or 'joint involvement episodes' refers to any encounter between two individuals in which the participants pay joint attention to, and jointly act upon, some external topic. For example the process of working with clay where both individuals are interested, have equal access to the materials and are mutually engaged.

Within the shared frame of reference, adult activity takes mostly two forms: supportive and challenging. The former serves to maintain the child's current focus of attention. Behaviours include holding objects, arranging objects in order for easier access, or verbally labelling events. The latter takes a more proactive form, especially in problem-solving situations where the child has to be assisted to reach a goal. Schaffer maintains that children's behaviour is richer and more complex during episodes of joint involvement than at other times. Therefore an ability to organise children's attention in joint involvement episodes would appear to be an essential component in adults' behaviour; *"the onus is on the educator to promote sharing of a topic"*.<sup>51</sup> Rankin<sup>52</sup> determined that true collaborative exploration takes place where all participants influence the direction, timing, and outcome of the investigation. In such a social setting, according to Rinaldi,<sup>53</sup> *"doubt and amazement are welcome factors in a deductive method similar to the one used by a detective... where the probable and the possible are assigned a place"*.

- **Collaboration about what matters to children:** Wells refers to how, in the pre-school years, conversation is most effective in enhancing children's development of language, *"when it is collaborative, when it is a joint construction"*.<sup>54</sup> Wells proposes that episodes like this are more likely to be sustained as there is an increased likelihood that both partners will correctly interpret what each other is saying and therefore collaboratively establish a shared construction of meaning about the topic. Tizard and Hughes<sup>55</sup> also

<sup>49</sup> Rogoff, B. (1990). *Apprenticeship in thinking: Cognitive development in a social context*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>50</sup> Schaffer, H. R. (1996). Joint involvement episodes as contexts for development. In H. Daniels (Ed.). *An introduction to Vygotsky* (pp. 251–280). London: Routledge, p.523

<sup>51</sup> Op cite, p. 264.

<sup>52</sup> Rankin, B. (1997) Education as collaboration, Learning from and building on Dewey Vygotsky and Piaget in *First Steps Towards Teaching the Reggio Way*, Joanne Hendrick (ed.). New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

<sup>53</sup> Rinaldi, C. (1992) *Social Construction in Reggio Emilia*, paper presented at the summer Institute, 'Images of the Child: An International Exchange with Leading Educators from Reggio Emilia, Italy', Newton: MA, p.5.

<sup>54</sup> Wells. G. (1985). *Language, learning and education*. Berkshire: NFER-Nelson, p. 15

<sup>55</sup> Tizard, B. & Hughes, M. (2002). *Young children learning*. (2nd ed.). UK: Blackwell Publishing, p.63.

point to the fundamental significance of creating a common referent between adults and children, in their words 'a shared world of common experience to act as a backcloth to their conversation'. In their analysis there is a lack of shared experience in early childhood settings, which creates a barrier between educators and children. Involving parents, seeking out children's interests, creating opportunities to establish a 'shared world' would appear to be an important first step in this process. Early childhood arts experiences create such a 'shared world'.

In summary the educator and artist is a researcher, a resource and guide to children; to provoke, co-construct, and stimulate thinking, and children's collaboration with peers.<sup>56</sup> The role of the adult is first and foremost to be that of a learner alongside the children. Educators and artists are committed to reflection about their own pedagogical practice as illustrated in the following figure.

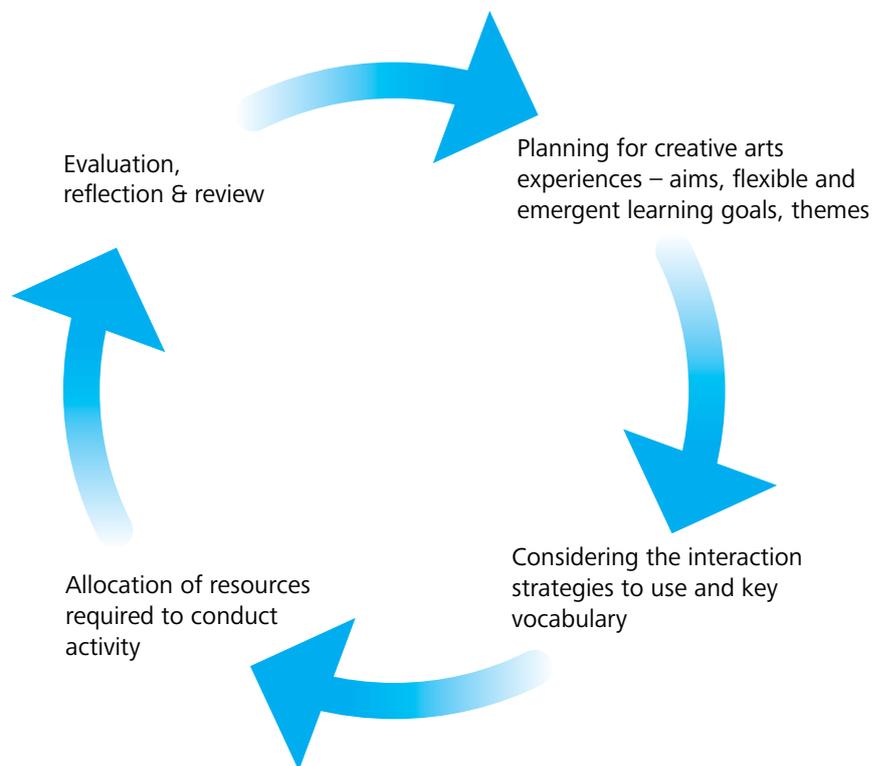


Fig. 2: Planning for and evaluating interactions in early childhood arts experiences

<sup>56</sup> Abbot, L. and Nutbrown, C. (Eds.) (2001). *Experiencing Reggio Emilia*. Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press.

Combining the different elements of the discussion above the following figure is a distillation of what the literature suggests is required for effective pedagogical practice in ECEC settings.

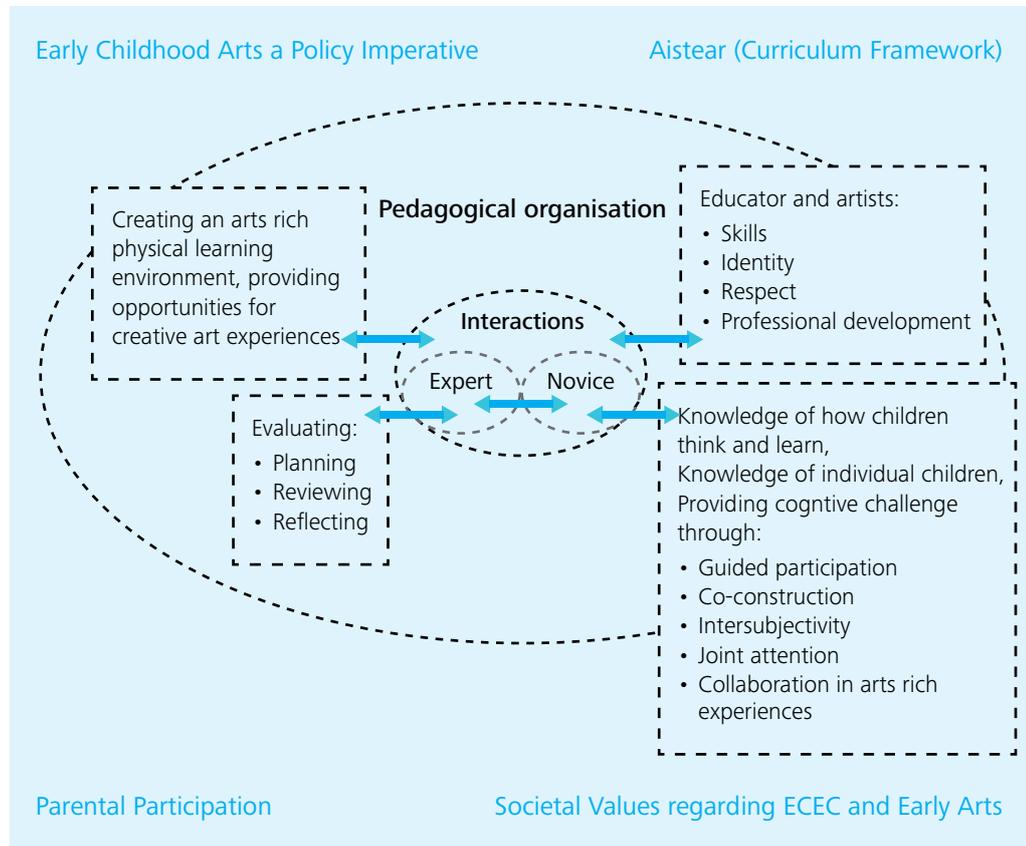


Fig. 3: Model of pedagogical organisation<sup>57</sup>

Interactions between novices and experts are at the core of the process of engagement between educators, artists and children. Some interaction strategies are the focus of the next section.

<sup>57</sup> Adapted from French, G. (2011). *Towards extended purposive conversations: An exploration of interactions between three educators and young children in early childhood education and care settings in urban areas designated as disadvantaged*. Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, Dublin 9.

## SPECIFIC INTERACTION STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE CHILDREN'S CREATIVITY

The specific interactions strategies that are considered to enhance children's creativity, thinking, problem-solving and learning generally include establishing a supportive interpersonal environment, active listening, scaffolding, discussing/questioning, and modelling and are now outlined.

### Establishing a supportive interpersonal environment

Learning is seen as a reciprocal and collaborative process between the adult and child.<sup>58</sup> This involves active listening and reflection in order to create a 'pedagogy of listening'<sup>59</sup> and a 'pedagogy of relationships'.<sup>60</sup> The literature is clear on the importance of children building positive relationships with an emotionally and physically present adult available in their social context.<sup>61</sup> Children in secure relationships with adults are more likely to explore their environment – thereby enhancing their learning and development. Furthermore, children are more likely to be more sociable and interact better with peers, have verbal acuity, and perform better at cognitive tasks.<sup>62, 63</sup> Therefore a focus on building relationships with children prior to engaging them in creative arts is important.

### Active listening

Learning also grows out of the child's direct actions on the materials. Listening is both an active and a reciprocal verb.<sup>64</sup> This suggests that adults need sensitivity to the children's current state, a desire to interpret their meaning, and for them to participate in the interaction. In other words adults need to actively listen. These are the characteristics of conversations (at any age) where there is a genuine desire to achieve mutual understanding.<sup>65</sup> Wells emphasises that such characteristics are particularly important when interacting with a less experienced conversationalist. Otherwise children's learning becomes dominated by educators' directions, thoughts and expectations. Children do not have opportunities then, to direct their own learning. Moss<sup>66</sup> explains that "*to listen in this way means being open to the Other, recognising the Other as different, trying to listen to the Other from their own position and experience, and not erasing differentness by treating the Other as the same, and by putting our understanding and perspective onto the Other*". What children say

<sup>58</sup> Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

<sup>59</sup> Rinaldi, C. (2005). Pedagogy of listening. Keynote address, European Early Childhood Educational Research Association's 15th Annual Conference, *Young children as citizens: Identity, belonging, participation in 2005*, held at St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra, Dublin, from 31st Aug – 3rd Sept.

<sup>60</sup> Malaguzzi, L. (1993). For an education based on relationships', *Young Children*, November, 9–13.

<sup>61</sup> Bowman, B., Donovan, S. & Burns, S., eds., (2001). *Eager to Learn: Educating our Preschoolers*. Committee on Early Childhood Pedagogy, National Research Council. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

<sup>62</sup> Hart, B., & Risley, T.R. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experiences of young American children*. Baltimore, Maryland: Brookes.

<sup>63</sup> Lobman, C. (2006). Improvisation: An analytic tool for examining teacher-child interactions in the early childhood classroom. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 21, 455–470.

<sup>64</sup> Rinaldi, C. (2006). *In dialogue with Reggio Emilia: Listening, researching and learning*. Oxon: Routledge.

<sup>65</sup> Wells, G. (1985). *Language, learning and education*. Berkshire: NFER-Nelson.

<sup>66</sup> Moss, P. (2001). The Otherness of Reggio in Abbot, L. and Nutbrown, C. (Eds.) (2001) *Experiencing Reggio Emilia*, Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press, p.128.

warrants respect, and authentic acceptance of their diverse family activities, lifestyles and choices, from adults without ridicule or mock surprise.<sup>67</sup> Rich early arts experiences, children's stories and their home lives can be a rich source for active listening.

## Scaffolding

The metaphor *scaffolding* was coined by Wood, Bruner and Ross<sup>68</sup> to describe the process by which adults or capable peers support and guide children's learning. A significant proportion of children's everyday activities take place in what Vygotsky calls the zone of proximal development, or ZPD.<sup>69</sup> Rogoff highlights that the idea of scaffolding is often considered in the same breath as the ZPD, whereas they are two distinct concepts.<sup>70</sup> The ZPD defines the range within which a person with more expertise assists another person to work at a higher level of competence than they could achieve on their own. Vygotsky states that the ZPD is "*the distance between the [child's] actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the [child's] level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers*".<sup>71</sup> Vygotsky explains that through social interaction with more expert companions, the child is able to model a variant of action "*which goes beyond the border of its own capacity*".<sup>72</sup> This suggests that instruction can only be effective if it is one step ahead of children's development.

A range of learning experiences and tasks involved in scaffolding has been identified. These include the need for adults to stimulate interest in the task; to simplify the task yet provide intellectual challenge; to provide time to afford necessary support and maintain the pursuit of the goal within the ZPD.<sup>73</sup> Educators and artists decide when children are ready to move from one level of development to another, and reduce their input as the child progresses. Thus, the key challenge for adults is to have sufficient knowledge of children's current level of development, which then becomes the challenge of defining the limits of the zone, and matching or tuning the adult support to a point beyond the child's current capabilities. Furthermore the literature advises that adults have knowledge of general pedagogical strategies, control frustration and risk and encourage self-regulation.<sup>74, 75</sup>

<sup>67</sup> MacNaughton, G. & Williams, G. (2004). *Teaching young children: Choices in theory and practice*. Berkshire: Open University Press.

<sup>68</sup> Wood, D., Bruner, J. & Ross, G. (1976). The role of tutoring in problem-solving. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 17(2), 89-100.

<sup>69</sup> Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

<sup>70</sup> Rogoff, B. (1998). Cognition as a collaborative process. In D. Kuhn & R. Siegler (Eds.). *Handbook of Child Psychology* (pp. 679-744; 5th ed.). New York: John Wiley.

<sup>71</sup> Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, p.86.

<sup>72</sup> Op cite, p.88.

<sup>73</sup> Berk, L. & Winsler, A. (1995). *Scaffolding children's learning: Vygotsky and early childhood education*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

<sup>74</sup> Op cite.

<sup>75</sup> MacNaughton, G. & Williams, G. (2004). *Teaching young children: Choices in theory and practice*. Berkshire: Open University Press

## Discussing/questioning

The term discussing refers to a prolonged conversation with a child about a particular topic.<sup>76</sup> More than a succession of questions from adult to child, discussion allows for an exchange of ideas with a view to reaching understanding, solving problems, or sharing information. Educators, artists and children in a discussion must be prepared to speak, listen, respond, put forward more than one point of view, and intend to develop their knowledge.<sup>77</sup> Creating a discussion requires of the educator and artist to take on the various roles of expert, facilitator and participant and, as referred to earlier, creator of meaningful contexts for discussion and enquiry. In the case of young children the topics for discussion could stem from children's own interests, their current activities or importantly from their questions, leading to opportunities for shared thinking.

From the perspective of educators the importance of questioning and attention to children's responses, have long been identified.<sup>78,79</sup> It should be noted that some educators' questioning styles may impede rather than stimulate conversation.<sup>80</sup> Fisher (2001) cited a study where it was found that the more adults asked questions the less likely they were to receive questions, promote elaborate responses and encourage spontaneous contributions in dialogue from children.<sup>81</sup> Similarly, Siraj-Blatchford and Manni analysed and categorised the range of questions asked by educators in the REPEY study which pointed to the preponderance of closed-ended questions. The style of questioning is therefore important. Closed-ended questions did not contribute to extending children's creativity or thinking.<sup>82</sup>

Cognitively challenging questions are designed to develop children's thinking and responses beyond the immediate to reflect and talk about what they have done, are doing, and plan to do.<sup>83</sup> The degree of cognitive challenge can range from low, labelling objects, yes/no responses, locating objects; to medium, describing, recalling, prompting, elaborating; to high, problem-solving, comparing, predicting, evaluating.<sup>84,85</sup> Open-ended questions assume the potential variety of responses without having to deduce a right or wrong answer. They support the sharing of theories and understandings, feelings and imaginings and provoke thought. Closed questions are used to recall facts. Children learn quickly to ignore questions that require 'yes' 'no' responses.<sup>86</sup> In the REPEY project the evidence suggests that open-ended questioning is coupled with better cognitive attainment. However, Siraj-Blatchford et al. reported that

<sup>76</sup> Fisher, R. (2001). *Teaching children to learn*. Cheltenham: Nelson Thornes Ltd.

<sup>77</sup> Op cite.

<sup>78</sup> Alexander, R. (2008). *Essays on pedagogy*. Oxon: Routledge. *American Educational Research Journal* 35(2), 333–349.

<sup>79</sup> Siraj-Blatchford, I. & Manni, L. (2008). 'Would you like to tidy up now?' An analysis of adult questioning in the English Foundation Stage. *Early Years*, 28(1), 5–22.

<sup>80</sup> Op cite.

<sup>81</sup> Fisher, R. (2001). *Teaching children to learn*. Cheltenham: Nelson Thornes Ltd.

<sup>82</sup> Siraj-Blatchford, I. & Manni, L. (2008). 'Would you like to tidy up now?' An analysis of adult questioning in the English Foundation Stage. *Early Years*, 28(1), 5–22.

<sup>83</sup> Massey, S. (2004). Teacher-child conversations in the preschool classroom. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 31(4), 227–231.

<sup>84</sup> Durden, T. & Dangel J. R. (2008). Teacher-involved conversations with young children during small group activity. *Early Years*, 28(3), 251–266.

<sup>85</sup> Massey, S. (2004). Teacher-child conversations in the preschool classroom. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 31(4), 227–231

<sup>86</sup> MacNaughton, G. & Williams, G. (2004). *Teaching young children: Choices in theory and practice*. Berkshire: Open University Press

"open-ended questions made up only 5.1% of the questioning used in the 14 case study settings".<sup>87</sup> Learning to use questioning effectively is therefore a challenge but critically important for early childhood educators and artists.

## Modelling

MacNaughton and Williams separate modelling and demonstration into two distinctive techniques. Modelling is described as a process by which children learn behaviours by simply copying others. Demonstration supports children's learning by showing children how to use special tools or materials or "*how to accomplish a particular task*".<sup>88</sup> Wells noted that parents rarely engaged in direct teaching. However, their influence could be seen in the modelling of mature behaviours, taking conversational turns, negotiating meaning, and sustaining interest.<sup>89</sup> Modelling, according to Bruner is the basis of apprenticeship.<sup>90</sup> It is an imitative process by which a novice is led into the skilled ways by an expert. However, research demonstrates that to get to deeper level of flexible skill there needs to be a combination of conceptual explanation combined with practice.<sup>91</sup>

Fisher referred to modelling as recreating the world as we understand it in words, to talk to ourselves about our experiences.<sup>92</sup> Through that process, the talking itself can give substance to our thinking. Therefore children should be encouraged to articulate their thinking through dialogue. This means children thinking about their own learning, remembering, evaluating their work and the usefulness of their current strategies.<sup>93</sup>

The next section conveys an understanding of how children learn and develop in order to support early childhood artists and educators to plan for early learning.

<sup>87</sup> Siraj-Blatchford, I., Sylva, K., Muttock, S., Gilden, R. & Bell, D. (2002). *Researching effective pedagogy in the early years*. Research Report No. 356. London: Department for Education and Skills, p.11

<sup>88</sup> MacNaughton, G. & Williams, G. (2004). *Teaching young children: Choices in theory and practice*. Berkshire: Open University Press, p.55

<sup>89</sup> Wells. G. (1985). *Language, learning and education*. Berkshire: NFER-Nelson

<sup>90</sup> Bruner, J. (1996). *The culture of education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

<sup>91</sup> Bowman, B., Donovan, S. & Burns, S., eds., (2001). *Eager to Learn: Educating our Preschoolers*. Committee on Early Childhood Pedagogy, National Research Council. Washington, DC: National Academy Press

<sup>92</sup> Fisher, R. (2001). *Teaching children to learn*. Cheltenham: Nelson Thornes Ltd

<sup>93</sup> Bruner, J. (1996). *The culture of education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

# THE PRINCIPLES OF HOW CHILDREN LEARN AND DEVELOP

*Síolta* (the Irish word for ‘seeds’) is *The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education*, which was developed by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) in 2006. *Síolta* sets the broad context for ensuring quality in early childhood settings within which early learning is best supported. *Aistear* (the Irish word for ‘journey’) is the *Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*, developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in 2009. *Aistear* is for all children from birth to six years and focuses on planning for the provision of enriching, challenging and enjoyable learning experiences for children. The development of *Aistear* was underpinned by consultation with the early childhood sector, commissioned research papers and portraiture studies of young children. These are all available on the NCCA website [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie). The background paper *Children’s early learning and development*<sup>94</sup> sets out the theory and research underpinning children’s early learning and development in *Aistear*.<sup>95</sup> These key messages about how children learn and develop are amended and adapted to take into account early childhood arts.

## Play

- Play is one of the key contexts for children’s early learning and development (See also *Síolta*, Standard 6 Play<sup>96</sup>).
- Through relationships in play, children develop and demonstrate improved verbal communication, high levels of social and interaction skills, creative use of play materials, imaginative and divergent thinking and problem-solving capacities.
- The most effective play settings have a balance between adult-initiated learning experiences and child-initiated learning experiences.
- Adults need to plan for play and the specific interactions required to appropriately scaffold children’s learning and enrich their creativity.

## Communication and language

- Social interaction, language, and scaffolding from adults are central in early learning and development. Children’s development of both receptive (understanding) and expressive (speaking) language is integral to all development particularly intellectual functioning and creativity.
- Some level of language development occurs naturally by children experiencing a language-rich environment; fuller development of children’s language capacities may require targeted teaching and encouragement of children’s verbal expression. Early childhood arts provide rich content for creative experiences to support children language development.

<sup>94</sup> French, G. (2007). *Children’s early learning and development*. Background paper for *Aistear*, the early childhood curriculum framework. Commissioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment: Dublin, pp.7–10.

<sup>95</sup> National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. (2009). *Aistear: The early childhood curriculum framework*. Dublin: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

<sup>96</sup> Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education. (2006). *Síolta: The national quality framework for early childhood education*. Dublin: Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education.

- Through language, the child appropriates his/her culture, seeks the cooperation of others in his/her activities, integrates new experiences into an existing knowledge base and reflects on his/her actions.
- In order to provide appropriate scaffolding for the child in learning and developing, a shared context of meaning and experience must be established; the adult often needs to interpret or expand on the child's utterances, gestures and mark-making (See also *Síolta*, Standard 5 Interactions<sup>97</sup>). Through shared creative arts experiences, the child gradually makes sense of the world and of adult meaning. This process requires a close and nurturing relationship between adult and child.

## Relationships

- The importance of the role of the adult and the establishment of positive relationships between the adult and child are critical in enhancing and enriching the child's learning and development.
- The child should experience trust, autonomy, initiative, empathy and self-confidence as the foundation for socialisation. The formation of attachment is especially important for the young child's emotional and social development. Emotional wellbeing impacts on young children's ability to concentrate and therefore learn. The loving, cosy, secure intimacy of strong attachments with adults reading stories, playing and engaging in early arts experiences can support relationship development.
- The participation of parents in their children's learning and development improves children's motivation, promotes a sense of partnership in the learning process and enhances children's confidence in all areas of learning.
- Children's evolving membership in their culture begins in the family and spirals outward as children engage with their peers. The child learns and develops in context and as part of his/her community and society. If early arts experiences are valued by family and peers, they will likely be valued by children.

## Active learning and meaning making

- The term active learning is defined as learning "*in which the child, by acting on objects and interacting with people, ideas and events, construct new understanding*".<sup>98</sup> Learning results from the child's attempts to pursue personal interests and goals, goals through first-hand experiences of the world around them and through stories and other creative arts experiences individually, in pairs, in groups, in families and in the community.
- Learning is a continual process of meaning making; it is not a linear input/output process. Active learning, physical and intellectual engagement with people (ideas, stories, visual arts) and materials (experiences of exposure to creative arts, books, mark-making), self and group directed problem-solving and repetition (including rhymes, songs, drama, music, dance and stories) are at the heart of learning and development.

<sup>97</sup> Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education. (2006). *Síolta: The national quality framework for early childhood education*. Dublin: Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education

<sup>98</sup> Hohmann, M. and Weikart, D., (1995). *Educating Young Children*, USA: High/Scope Press, p.17.

- The educator, therefore, has a responsibility to provide art rich environments where children are able to explore, touch, manipulate and experiment with a variety of real life and diverse materials and where children can ask questions, make hypothesis and develop their thinking.
- Children learn in collaboration with others yet have to construct learning for themselves. True collaborative exploration takes place where all participants influence the direction, timing, and outcome of the investigation.

## Equality and diversity

- All children are individuals, unique in their abilities, from a rich diversity of backgrounds, beliefs, cultures and experiences of early childhood arts. Children have the right to be treated with respect, positive regard and dignity.
- Biases develop very early in young children; through participating in everyday activity and play (including art rich experiences), children absorb powerful messages from people, the environment and community regarding their identity, culture and what is valued in reading material, conversation and creative experiences. They also absorb powerful messages about the importance and function of early arts.
- By exploring the attributes of their own and other cultures, including early childhood arts, children come to appreciate their common humanity as well as enjoying an optimal environment for cognitive, emotional and social growth.
- Early childhood artists and educators should enable children to acknowledge, respect and affirm diversity in order to promote equality and to challenge unfair discrimination. Early childhood artists and educators should understand that authentic, democratic relationships support children's development in this regard.

## The arts rich learning environment

- Children learn through their senses both indoors and outdoors, in a supportive environment (See also *Síolta*, Standard 2 Environments<sup>99</sup>).
- There is a consequent requirement on early childhood artists and educators to provide a range of challenging and interesting indoor and outdoor arts experiences for children.
- The environment should offer children opportunities to actively explore, to work independently and with others, to make decisions and follow through with their ideas, to solve problems, to engage in real activities and to experience the arts in co-operative, symbolic, dramatic or pretend play.
- The most effective learning comes from simple but versatile materials (bits of soft wood, feathers, cork, string, fabric, stones, clay) stored and accessible to children. The learning environment should extend children's imagination and be adaptable to suit their learning needs and level of understanding.

<sup>99</sup> Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education. (2006). *Síolta: The national quality framework for early childhood education*. Dublin: Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education.

## The whole child in context

- Holistic learning and development involves all areas of development and embraces a view of the whole child developing in the context of family, home and community.
- Bruce reported how the basic processes of movement, play, communication, self-esteem, and understanding of self and others, “as well as the symbolic layerings in development (leading to dances, reading, writing, mathematical and musical notations, drawing and model making) support children’s learning and development.”<sup>100</sup> Therefore, developmental domains such as cognitive, linguistic, social, emotional, spiritual and physical cannot be separated out; neither can subjects such as mathematics, science and art. Young children do not learn in discrete units; they make connections across their learning with these connections changing and developing with new experiences.
- A framework which uses themes such as *Aistear* (well-being, identity and belonging, communicating and exploring and thinking) to present children’s early learning and development offers a way of moving from thinking about learning and development in discrete developmental domains to thinking about these in a more holistic and integrated way. Within *Aistear* children are supported to grow and develop socially, physically, creatively, cognitively, linguistically and so on, but in a way which is natural, meaningful and enjoyable for children. The themes bridge the developmental and subject domains and move towards a more integrated approach which is more in tune with how children learn and develop.
- Children’s interests and learning dispositions (for curiosity, wonder, resilience, and playfulness) are at the centre of what and how they learn. Consequently, the thematic framework supports children’s learning and development in a way which is more natural and enjoyable for young children.

## Early childhood arts curriculum

- The early childhood curriculum is concerned with the totality of the policies and practices established in the setting, the relationships between all participants, the attitudes skills and knowledge of the staff in relation to early childhood arts, the experiences provided, the resources, the arts rich learning environment, the pedagogical (teaching and learning) styles and the systems of assessment (See also *Síolta*, Standard 7 Curriculum<sup>101</sup>).
- An appropriate curriculum for young children views learning as a process as opposed to creating a product.
- The child’s interests, strengths, culture, needs and learning styles are placed at the centre of planning for his/her learning and development.
- Providing appropriate learning experiences for children requires early childhood educators and artists to have knowledge of child development in order to support children’s learning and development and to forward plan for a wide range of appropriate early childhood art experiences.

<sup>100</sup> Bruce, T. (2004). *Developing learning in early childhood*. London: Paul Chapman, p.XV

<sup>101</sup> Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education. (2006). *Síolta: The national quality framework for early childhood education*. Dublin: Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education.

The curriculum in the schools of Reggio Emilia is not established in advance, but emerges totally through the interests of children.<sup>102</sup> Topics for study are captured from the talk of children, through community or family events, as well as the known interests of children (puddles, shadow, and dinosaurs). They are pursued in depth through projects. Malaguzzi's emphasis is on the child's hundred ways of thinking, of doing, of playing, of speaking.<sup>103</sup> Educators and artists recognise that it is important to study the ideas expressed in children's words, drawings, and play. They know that this will help them learn how to scaffold further learning. Collaborative group work, both large and small, is considered valuable and necessary to advance cognitive development. Children are encouraged to dialogue, critique, compare, negotiate, hypothesize, and problem solve through group work. Within the Reggio Emilia approach multiple perspectives promote both a sense of group membership and the uniqueness of self. Parker<sup>104</sup> illustrates Reggio's theme of revisiting – or reproposing – children's language and drawings to them over time, allowing children to reflect and transform their words and images should they so wish.

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<sup>102</sup> Abbot, L. and Nutbrown, C. (Eds) (2001). *Experiencing Reggio Emilia*. Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press.

<sup>103</sup> Malaguzzi, L (1993) 'History Ideas and Basic Philosophy, in Edwards, C. Gandini, L. and Forman, G., (eds), (1993), *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education*, Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex.

<sup>104</sup> Parker, C. (2001). 'She's Back!' in Abbot, L. and Nutbrown, C. (Eds.) (2001) *Experiencing Reggio Emilia*, Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press.

## A PERSPECTIVE ON CHILDREN AND THOSE WHO WORK WITH THEM

The vision of children and of early childhood artists and educators that underpins early childhood practice is centred on a holistic approach to child wellbeing and development, integrating education and care. The vision is focused on the 'here and now' (children's 'being' in the present) rather than only on skills for tomorrow (children's 'becoming' for the future). This perspective is drawn from French.<sup>105, 106</sup>

### Children

- Are communicators, talkers, readers, scientists, artists, explorers, architects, musicians and mathematicians from birth.
- Have a large variation in the rate they develop early childhood art skills, have a unique genius and are inquisitive learners.
- Are active agents in their lives who are able to make choices and decisions, and who can initiate experiences as opposed to being the passive recipients of experiences and ideas created by adults.
- Are co-constructors of knowledge (creators of learning in collaboration with others).
- Are researchers actively making meaning of the world.
- Enjoy all kinds of experiences of early childhood arts learning opportunities (given sufficient space and time).

*"Drawing on centuries of research, the modern day view of the child is one of him/her being a competent learner, capable of making choices and decisions; a young citizen and participator in many contexts; actively learning in reciprocal relations with adults and other children. This new construction of childhood is oriented towards the child's present rather than his/her future."*<sup>107</sup>

### Early childhood artists and educators

- Understand that creativity development is a result of exposure to an arts rich environment and input from adults as well as the child's cognitive and linguistic competence.
- Are aware of children's creative development and needs, and the implication of these for early intervention, planning, interaction and assessment.
- Enliven children's innate dispositions for wonderment, excitement, curiosity, perseverance and full engagement in language rich experiences.

<sup>105</sup> French, G. (2007). Children's early learning and development. Background paper for Aistear, the early childhood curriculum framework. Commissioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

<sup>106</sup> French, G. (2013). *Early speech and language matters: Enriching the communication environment and language development in early childhood*. Dublin: Barnardos' Training and Resource Service.

<sup>107</sup> French, G. (2007). *Children's early learning and development*. Background paper for Aistear, the early childhood curriculum framework. Commissioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, p.24.

- Hold high expectations for children’s artistic abilities and enable children to become aware of their own unique talents and competences.
- Value play as a pathway to learning, and understand the importance of creating and maintaining high-quality arts rich environments where children are motivated to engage in early childhood arts.
- Model decontextualised language to older children. This means going beyond concrete art experience to imagine situations not present which requires children to engage in abstract thought and to share those thoughts in language with an audience who may not necessarily share the same temporal and spatial context. In other words to encourage discussion including use of sophisticated vocabulary and sentence structures; provide encounters with different styles of language; and scaffold children to engage in language experiences.<sup>108</sup>
- Implement a range of strategies that have been shown to enhance language learning in the context of dialogic (two-way) interaction, some of which include: watching, waiting and listening to children – following their communicative lead; planning for and modelling appropriate vocabulary; commenting specifically and accurately on what children are doing thereby affirming children’s work without need for praise; expanding or extending children’s ideas; reflecting back to children what they say (while keeping children’s meaning); encouraging turn-taking; and engaging in extended purposive conversations. Art rich experiences provided the fuel for such conversations and holistic learning and development.
- Are imbued with a sense of passion about children’s creative learning and development.

## The Three R’s

In summary early childhood artists and educators underpin their practice by the

### **Three R’s:**

- **Respect** for children’s early childhood arts learning through play
- The provision of **relevant** and meaningful early childhood arts experiences and supportive relationships
- **Reflection** on those experiences and relationships

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<sup>108</sup> Shiel, G., Cregan, Á, McGough, A & Archer, P. (2012). *Oral language in early childhood and primary education (3–8 years)*. Commissioned Research Report No. 14, Dublin: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This paper began with an exploration of the concept of pedagogy. International research on the importance of effective pedagogy in ECEC was discussed. Pedagogical organisation and the underpinning concepts of supporting children's creativity and thinking relevant to the practice of early childhood arts were then considered. Specific interaction strategies that are considered to enhance children's creativity, thinking, problem-solving and learning generally (establishing a supportive interpersonal environment, active listening, scaffolding, discussing/questioning, and modelling) were identified. The principles underpinning early learning and development were then outlined. Finally, contemporary perspectives on children and those who work with very young children (incorporating both early childhood artists and early childhood educators) were presented. The key findings suggest that:

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- A pedagogy of listening and relationships should prevail in early arts experiences where children are listened to with intentionality and respect. Children are competent learners who are expert in their own lives and learning and merit active participation. Professional preparation should emphasise artists' and educators' roles as co-constructors of children's learning.
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- In order to improve the outcomes for children's learning and development, educators and artists need thorough grounding in the theoretical principles underpinning pedagogical and artistic practice and skills in interactions.
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- Artists and educators need grounding in how to encourage positive dispositions for learning and maintain young children's natural curiosity, creativity, wonder and reflection, in addition to creating "common knowledge" in first-hand early childhood arts experiences.
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- The understandings in relation to early learning and development that need to be foregrounded are how children can learn and develop through active exploration and participation in early childhood arts experiences, which in turn need to be integrated in the early childhood curriculum (at home and in settings).
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In conclusion, ECEC is enhanced by theories that foreground the cultural and socially constructed nature of learning. From this perspective, learning and development are inextricably intertwined and are enmeshed within the milieu of social relationships. The child develops not in isolation but in the context of family, early childhood educators and artists, neighbourhood, community, society and public policies. Children's early learning and development, therefore, is a matter for the whole of society. The literature reviewed in this paper elucidates the importance of early childhood arts experiences as a vehicle to provide ideal opportunities to enhance children's learning and development. We know that early childhood is the most critical period for all learning and development and that parents and the home learning environment are key. Early childhood artists and educators are uniquely positioned to positively impact on children's well-being today as the opening quote suggests through enriching creative arts opportunities.