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## **Co-Constructing Sustainable Collaborations in Early Childhood Settings Through the Arts**

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### **Abstract**

This article reflects the inquiries and discoveries experienced by early childhood educators and teaching artists involved in participatory action research designed to explore how to co-construct sustainable collaborations in early childhood settings. Drawing inspiration from the Reggio Emilia Approach and other international examples, the authors detail how professional development through collaborative research leads to

co-constructed experiences that significantly impact artistic encounters for children. This article highlights a two-year research project, named the Leading Learning Council (LLC), and focuses on overarching pedagogical practices, the role of documentation and reflection in the co-construction of arts experiences for educators and children, an example of the classroom as a laboratory, and considerations for applying the model within diverse early childhood settings. A significant outcome of the project was participant recognition of leadership roles in sustaining collaborative arts-based approaches in early childhood education.

### **Introduction**

Researchers have suggested the need for collaborations between the fields of early childhood and art education (Baum, 2017; McClure et al., 2017) to create sustainable pedagogical approaches that include perspectives from both fields of inquiry. Furthermore, there is increasing interest in the “dialogue surrounding the importance of arts-based education for young children” (Baum, 2017, p. 183) and the arts-inclusive professional development practices of early childhood teachers (McClure et al., 2017). All children deserve high-quality artistic experiences that enable them to express themselves; additionally, educators should feel empowered to explore artistic expression within classrooms. We believe that when teachers and artists are supported to learn alongside each other “a third space” is created (Stevenson & Deasy, 2005), allowing for reciprocal knowledge to be recognized and for co-constructed experiences to develop that significantly impact artistic encounters.

This article reflects a two-year participant action research (PAR) project and the emergent inquiries and discoveries experienced by the Leading Learners Council (LLC), a group of early childhood teachers, administrators, teaching artists, and cultural institutions from the Northern Phoenix, Arizona region. In 2018, under the direction of Christie Colunga (Early Childhood Education Program Director and residential faculty at Paradise Valley Community College) and funded by First Things First, the LLC investigated intersections between early childhood education and the expressive arts. The LLC worked together as a “creative community of learners who study, research, and converse to exchange ideas, discover common ground, and create places of intersections in early childhood education and the arts that can inspire innovation and deeper understanding” (Yu & Aprill, 2020). For the project, the LLC members chose participatory action research (PAR) as a methodology because it empowered early childhood educators and teaching artists to become co-researchers and advocates in investigating new knowledge about sustainable arts collaborations in early learning settings specific to their community (Reason & Bradbury, 2006). Because of young children’s abilities to use the arts as expressive languages, fine and performing arts are also referenced as expressive arts throughout the paper.

The authors were facilitators of the professional development initiatives and researchers alongside the LLC members. In this article, the facilitators overview the project, including the co-constructed pedagogical practices and considerations for application within diverse early childhood settings. They think critically about collaborative and reciprocal professional development structures between early childhood contexts, cultural institutions, and professional teaching artists; identify collaborative practices that promote children's multi-modal artistic expressions; and develop a greater understanding of professional development that includes artistic languages as inspiration for teaching and learning within early childhood contexts.

### *Inspirations*

It is important to acknowledge that teaching artists' residencies in preschool and early childhood settings have traditionally taken inspiration from K–12 models. Typically, teaching artists are seen primarily as experts with a pre-designed and predetermined set of practices, while classroom teachers and children have little input regarding artistic experiences in school settings (Burnaford et al., 2001). In professional collaborations, little attention has been given to the cumulative power of arts and early childhood pedagogies.

The LLC members took inspiration from the roles of the *atelierista* and *pedagoga* associated with the Reggio Emilia Approach to better understand how to foster collaborative and sustainable arts experiences in early childhood settings (Vecchi, 2010). In the 1960s, Loris Malaguzzi brought artists into the school, known as *atelieristas*, to work alongside teachers and children in developing interdisciplinary inquiry projects for the integration of expressive languages with knowledge-building processes (Cagliari et al., 2016). The sustainability of the role of the *atelierista* in the schools of Reggio Emilia is due to their participation in observations and corresponding documentation (i.e., photography, video recordings, written notes, children's work, etc.) which always plays a critical role in developing emergent inquiries with children and a reflective role for educators and *atelieristas*. Pedagogical documentation moves beyond just collecting artifacts to include the slowed-down process of co-reflecting and meaning-making as a form of ongoing, collaborative professional development. As stated by *atelierista* Veia Vecchi (2010), "The *atelierista*'s professional development and her work with children in schools is strongly supported through relationships with teachers and *pedagogistas* and the study of pedagogical documentation" (p. 4). *Pedagogistas* provide ongoing support to *atelieristas* and classroom teachers by studying pedagogical documentation. The collaborative nature of the *pedagoga*, *atelierista*, and early childhood educator roles in Reggio Emilia was the primary inspiration for our work. While the LLC took inspiration from the Reggio Emilia Approach in the research design, the teaching artists did not all work in Reggio-inspired environments and did not directly identify as *atelieristas*. Through this research, the group modeled ways to take inspiration from the process of intentional reflection on co-developed inquiry and documentation.

Our work looked to 5x5x5=creativity and the Curious Schools Project as Reggio-inspired international examples of collaboration between early childhood settings and fine arts institutions. For instance, 5x5x5=creativity is an initiative that was established in Bath (UK) in 2000 to develop and embed a creative and reflective pedagogy in early years settings (París & Hay, 2019). The LLC was interested in constructing similar practices as 5x5x5=creativity such as developing a co-inquiry “creative-reflective cycle” that involved the following:

Observation/ documentation (thinking about what we are noticing and documenting this in different ways); revisiting (discussing key documented experiences, drawing on different perspectives); analysing and hypothesizing (thinking about what is emerging, what questions are being asked?); and thinking and about future possibilities and provocations (How can we support people’s interests and fascinations? What provocations can be made?). (París & Hay, 2019, p. 76)

The process of documentation, reflection, and provocations provided space for the development of creative potential for all stakeholders, including children, artists, teachers, families, schools, cultural institutions, and community organizations. Similarly, the Curious Schools research initiative of the University of Tasmania (Australia) scaffolded collaboration between teaching artists and early childhood educators. This initiative drew upon best practices in early childhood teaching and learning methodologies, including child-initiated inquiry and exploration of materials to catalyze authentic collaborations between teachers and artists in Pre-K through secondary classrooms across Tasmania (Hunter et al., 2018). LLC researchers took inspiration from multiple initiatives that valued emergent and collaborative inquiry between children, artists, and educators as the project began (Bond, 2013; Gallas, 1994; Hanna, 2016; Kind, 2010; McArdle & Boldt, 2013).

### **Participatory Action Research Methodology**

The LLC’s participatory action research (PAR) approach was fitting because it involved early childhood educators and artists who were deeply connected to the community as co-researchers to produce “practical knowledge that is useful to people in the everyday conduct of their lives” (Reason & Bradbury, 2006, p. 2). Reggio educator Carlina Rinaldi (2006) interprets research as a process of investigating the everyday life of classrooms through documentation, dialogue, and reflection:

It’s not that we don’t recognize your [academic] research, but we want our research, as teachers, to be recognized. And to recognize research as a way of thinking, of approaching life, of negotiating, of documenting. It’s all research. It’s also a context that allows dialogue. Dialogue generates research, research generates dialogue. (p. 192)

PAR was born from the Freirean principle that research is understood as a co-construction of knowledge driven by community participants (Freire, 2000). In this project, LLC members jointly co-investigated intersections between early childhood education and the arts, while the

individual expertise of each participant contributed to the collective investigation. As a subset of the broader field of action research, PAR brings together action and reflection and theory and practice through participation with others who share similar concerns and interests (Reason & Bradbury, 2006). Collaboratively, LLC members engaged in a cycle of inquiry, which employed an intentional reflection and action interplay while also weaving in opportunities to consider the relationship between theory and practice (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. The cycle of inquiry developed by the LLC.

Reggio educators Giacomini et al. (2008) describe their collaborative research strategies as an alternation of theory and practice through encounters between *atelieristas* and early childhood educators. The LLC was inspired by large-group "choral moments" as opportunities for experiencing and reflecting together as well as "micro-moments" for more in-depth small-group and individual exploration and processing (p. 3). Throughout the two-year LLC research project, the cycle of inquiry and aforementioned moments were supported through bi-monthly in-person large- and small-group meetings, monthly virtual large-group meetings, and monthly individual and small-group virtual reflections and planning meetings.

The LLC project began with the premise that members' expertise and experiences in the arts and early childhood education contexts were essential elements in the co-construction of effective early childhood art pedagogies. Members' inquiries and interactions with the theories and

practices of other experienced artists and educators also served as the basis for advancing new knowledge about teaching artist collaborations with early childhood educators and children. The two-year participatory research project included several experiences; this article will focus on a selected few to offer insight into possibilities for others.

### **Year One: Create Reciprocal Spaces for Co-Constructing Knowledge**

The first step in the cycle of inquiry was to form a mixed table of thinkers with diverse backgrounds in arts and early learning contexts. Members were invited based on past professional development experiences with Paradise Valley Community College and their interest in working alongside others to deepen their understanding of arts in early childhood settings. The initial Leading Learning Council included twelve members: three early childhood classroom teachers, one early childhood program director, one early childhood pedagogical coordinator, three college faculty, and four teaching artists (two theater teaching artists, one music museum educator, and one *atelierista*). Members convened to “investigate disparate disciplines of the fine and performing arts and early childhood education to advocate for innovation when these two fields combine” (Yu & Aprill, 2020). Dr. Gigi Schroeder Yu from the University of New Mexico's art education program served as the lead facilitator of the project to bridge the traditionally segregated institutions and communities. She knew the participants and institutions because she worked alongside the North Phoenix early childhood educators and artists, designing professional development initiatives for several years before the LLC research project. During the first year, project members were keenly interested in developing relationships between educators and artists to study and learn together. Facilitators and members sought to create an engaging dynamic to develop new collective knowledge, processes, and practices for creating early childhood arts experiences. True to PAR, all members participated in data collection and analysis.

#### ***Examples of Creating a Reciprocal Space***

In the initial stage of PAR, it is important to offer opportunities for the participants to know each other beyond names and professional titles (Ayala & Zaal, 2016; Cammarota & Romero, 2009). As such, each member created an “I am. . .” poem about their identities and interests. Shared at the first large-group meeting, the poems were a starting point for interpersonal connection.

After the poems were shared, members brainstormed ideas regarding the intersections between practices, processes, and philosophical underpinnings evident in both early childhood and the expressive arts (see Figure 2). This yielded many possibilities for deeper investigation around imagination; storytelling; creation; discovery; exploration through play; risk-taking; socio-emotional expression; collaboration and relationality; movement, the body, and sensory experiences; and the investigation of context and interests. The words from the Venn diagram

(see Figure 2) represented the considerable potential for deeper investigations and provided overarching concepts relative to early learning and the arts.

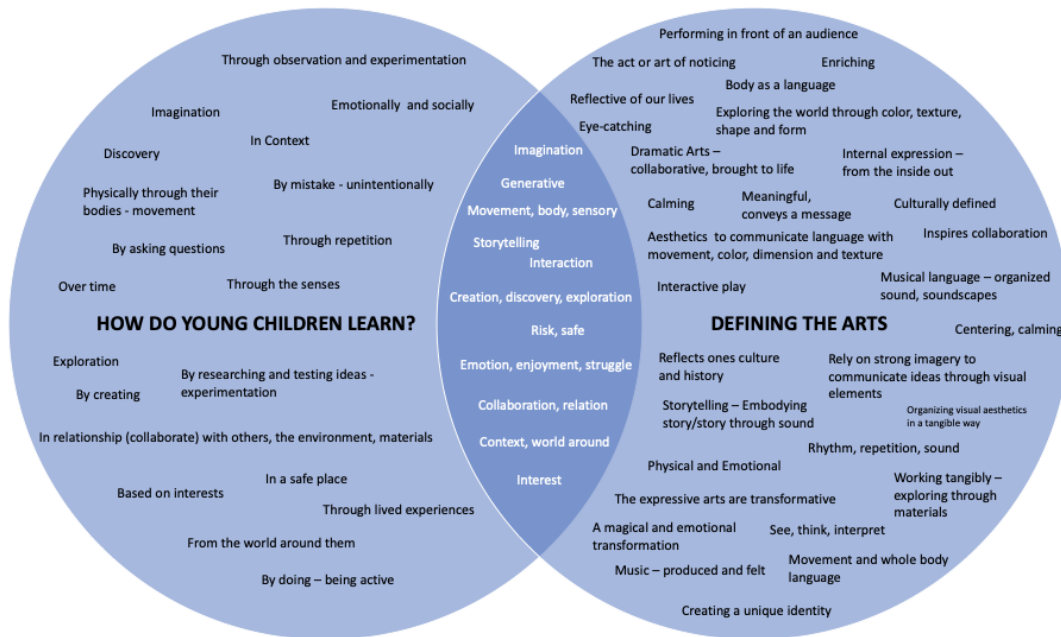


Figure 2. Co-constructed diagram of the intersections between young children and the arts.

### ***Co-Creating Research Questions and Investigating Together***

LLC members divided into small groups of two to five participants and began to develop potential research questions. Each member chose a research question to investigate within their context. Over time, members related their findings to others researching similar questions, creating a fresh and compelling discourse community. Questions included:

- 1) What are developmentally appropriate practices for young children in the expressive arts?
- 2) What are professional development experiences for early childhood educators in the expressive arts?
- 3) What are approaches for collaborations between teaching artists and classroom teachers?
- 4) What is the role of the family in arts education partnerships?

Full-group LLC meetings convened approximately every other month, and small-group meetings took place in between. This allowed collaborators to share with one another and the larger group.

### ***Large Group Provocations***

Facilitators listened deeply and reflected on questions and interests expressed by LLC members to plan new experiences. Like Malaguzzi's metaphor for passing a ball back and forth (Edwards et al., 2015), facilitators developed provocations that responded to the group's ideas. This is an important aspect of the PAR approach. The large-group research questions guided the

experiences: How can we build a shared understanding of artistic content areas (i.e., theater, music, dance, and visual arts)? Why is this important, and how does this contribute to an overall understanding of artistic thinking?

Collective research processes were informed by facilitators' inclusion of historical and contemporary literature and examples of arts education partnerships and pedagogical approaches for working with young children. This represents the alternation between theory and practice in PAR. Representative questions, readings, and other research experiences are illustrated in the table below:

**Table 1**

*Research questions and strategies*

<b>Representative co-created research questions</b>	<b>Research interest and supported readings</b>	<b>Research strategies</b>
How can we build a joint understanding of artistic content areas (theater, music, dance, and visual arts)?	Teaching artists from visual, musical, and theater arts represented their art forms through discussing artistic thinking.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Interviews with practicing artists:</b> The group interviewed Dr. Christopher Scinto (composer and PVCC Fine and Performing Arts Division Chair).</li> <li>2. <b>Site visits to cultural institutions,</b> including the Musical Instrument Museum</li> <li>3. <b>Being an audience:</b> The group attended <i>And, in this Corner. . . Casius Clay</i> a theater production co-presented by Childsplay Theatre Co and the Black Theater Troupe.</li> </ol>
What are developmentally appropriate practices for young children in the expressive arts?	Learning from early childhood practitioners how the arts are studied with young children in a classroom setting (Bond, 2013; Gallas, 1994;	4. <b>Lecture presentation and discussion</b> with artist/early childhood teacher researcher Suzanne Shakespeare Jones based on an in-classroom study of music



	Hanna, 2016; Kind, 2010; McArdle & Boldt, 2013; Vecchi, 2010)	
What practices support collaboration between teaching artists and early childhood classroom teachers?	Learning from experienced arts educators about designing and implementing collaborations between teaching artists and classroom teachers. (Burnaford et al., 2001; Giacopini et al., 2008; Hanna, 2013; Kind et al., 2007; Oken-Wright, 2008; París & Hay, 2019; Yu, 2008)	<b>5. Interviews with arts education leaders:</b> Conducted virtual and in-person interviews with arts educators and leaders, namely Arnie Aprill (arts education consultant and founder of Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education) and Anna Golden ( <i>atelierista</i> at Stony Sabot School in Richmond, VA)

As intended, the experiences yielded thought-provoking dialogue and expression around the intersections of early childhood and the arts. LLC members met in small groups to create images that articulated the collaborative nature of the work. Two teaching artists and an early childhood educator chose weaving imagery to highlight the interconnectedness of unique identities (see Figure 3). The loom represents the framework holding the threads together and the creation of a shared vocabulary, experiences, and methodologies. For example, interviewing Dr. Christopher Scinto about his compositional practices helped LLC members consider how to “read or interpret the children’s processes of making sounds and composing from a different point of view” (Giacopini et al., 2008, p. 3). Pedagogical models and voices from visual, theater, and musical arts deepened early childhood educators’ understandings of artistic disciplines. Likewise, teaching artists gained insights into early childhood contexts to better inform their practices.

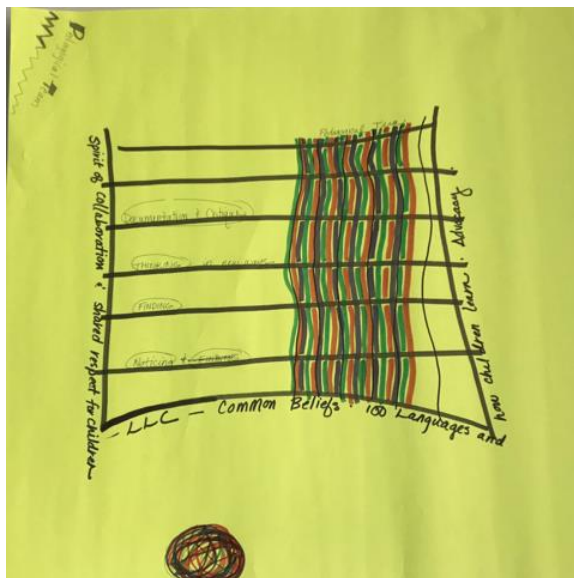


Figure 3. Weaving together teaching artists' and early childhood educators' identities.

McArdle and Boldt's (2013) quote from a shared reading of *Young Children, Pedagogy, and the Arts* also resonated with the LLC members:

Children need teachers who believe that there is something to be learned when it comes to the arts. And children need teachers who understand that they must themselves first learn about the child and their interests and their thinking...effective teaching in the arts requires a **combination of knowledge about the arts with an understanding of how to see children** – how to tune in and learn from children what it is they need. (p. 15)

Recognizing that effective early childhood arts teaching involves both a knowledge of artistic practices and of how to learn from and with children contributed to the LLC's reflections and suggestions for the next phase of the research project.

### ***Collaborative Reflection: New Discoveries and New Questions***

In the spirit of an action research cycle, LLC members collaboratively reflected on the first-year work to determine actionable next steps. At the end of year one, each LLC participant shared their individual and small-group action projects through presentations, and some analyzed how they identified with the projects. The members were able to consider their research questions based on others' work. For example, Katherine Palmer (curator of education at the Musical Instrument Museum) presented her research question of fostering more musical early childhood classrooms as it aligned with the LLC shared experiences. Group discussion of the LLC readings and resources, the presentation by musician/educator Suzanne Shakespeare Jones, and interviews with arts leaders deepened Palmer's understanding of children's documented musical expressions and generated additional goals for year-two investigations.

Other collaborative findings from year one included: teaching artists and early childhood educators benefit more from protocols than predesigned materials; teaching artists and early childhood educators need time and space to reflect and learn together using documentation; and creative professional development initiatives empower learning for artists and educators. Using these findings, LLC members developed the following year's goals: 1) foster collaborative professional development opportunities between teaching artists and early childhood educators and 2) create new classroom collaborations between teaching artists and educators.

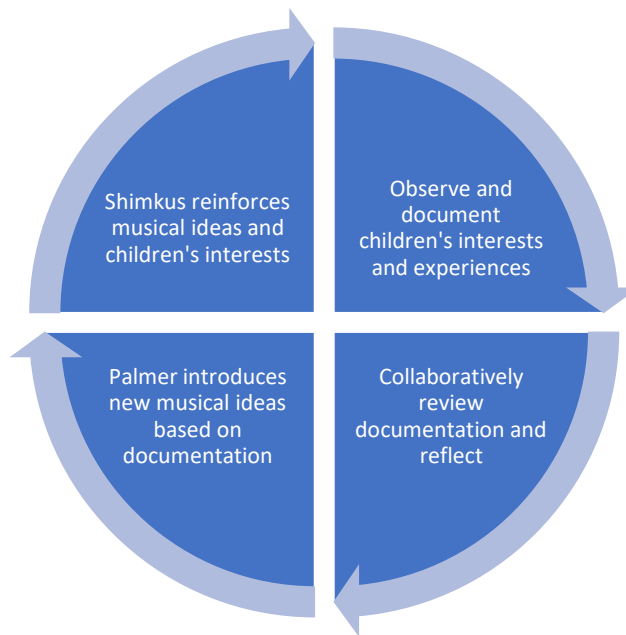
### **Year Two: Relaunching and Putting into Practice**

As the LLC embarked upon the second year in 2019–2020, the members moved into the action stage of the inquiry cycle. They actively created opportunities in classrooms and the community. Arnold Aprill, arts education consultant and founder of Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education, joined as a project consultant. Aprill had previously participated in similar action research processes while working to form new collaborations with artists and educators in Chicago public schools. During year two of the project, the LLC's work shifted to include three additional early childhood educators to intentionally focus on co-constructing collaboration practices between teaching artists in early childhood classrooms. The following sections detail two experiences that highlight how teaching artists and early childhood educators may benefit from imaginative and creative collaborative professional development initiatives.

#### ***Making Music Together: A Snapshot of Co-Constructed Classroom Experience***

The following story, including how the LLC impacted the collaborative approach and a reflection on what was learned, is a snapshot of a partnership that was formed during the 2019–2020 school year. LLC members Dulce Shimkus (preschool teacher) and I, Katherine Palmer (MIM curator of education), worked together to better understand how children learn through music. Shimkus had a deep interest in music but was unsure how to employ it in her classroom, and I wanted to know how my early childhood music and movement activities could reach beyond the formal thirty-minute musical play experiences I typically offer. Shimkus's classroom of four- and five-year-olds was a laboratory space for exploring our collective research interests. Shimkus was interested in investigating how to capitalize on children's spontaneous musical expressions witnessed in her classroom. My interest was in how to support ongoing musical interest in the classroom, especially between my weekly visits. We wondered, "How could documentation contribute to an emergent classroom musical study?" Throughout our collaboration, Shimkus and I observed, documented through photography and video recording, reflected, and co-constructed musical experiences based on the children's interests (see Figure 4). Shimkus's expertise in the visual arts, emergent curriculum, and the Reggio Emilia Approach contributed significantly to the project. Ana Stigsson, LLC member and residential faculty at Paradise Valley Community College (PVCC), met with us weekly to guide our study of documentation, using a protocol inspired by the LLC's research from the previous year. Stigsson

helped to ensure all voices were considered while we reflected on the documentation and co-constructed the next steps.



*Figure 4.* The cyclic process of observing, documenting, and reflecting utilized by Shimkus and Palmer to co-construct musical experiences.

During my initial weekly 30- to 45-minute classroom visits, I introduced musical concepts through exploratory experiences such as finger plays, movements with scarves and feathers, and rhythms and sounds with instruments like drums, spoons, glockenspiels, and resonator bars. In between my weekly visits, Shimkus continued to explore the musical concepts by introducing musical books and visualizing music while drawing and listening to songs. The students became interested in the rhythms they heard, and when asked how they would name them, responded “ba-da, ba-da, ba-da” for the theme from *Jaws* and “boom boom ba-da boom ba-da boom” for “The Imperial March” from *Star Wars*. Shimkus encouraged them to draw the sounds, creating the children’s first rhythm symbols. Children suggested, “Let’s put them together,” and rhythm sentences began to fill the classroom.

We continued to meet with Stigsson to review documentation and create new ideas based on the children’s expressions – always going through the same protocol (see Figure. 4). With the creation of the children’s rhythm language, I introduced elements of Western musical notation through quarter notes, eighth notes, and quarter note rests. The children combined their rhythm language with Western notation and used the two interchangeably (see Figure 5).



Figure 5. Reviewing children's emerging musical languages.

Without missing a beat, the children seamlessly transitioned and correctly translated them. Both languages were utilized in various ways: rhythms were used to help sound out names and during morning journaling, rhythms were personified and took on human characteristics and feelings, rhythms were incorporated into interesting visual arts pieces, and rhythms led to storytelling. Shimkus shared the following story of one bilingual child:

He realized how fluent he could be through the language of music and rhythm. He wrote a story using quarter notes and eighth notes. It was pages and pages of notes. He brought it to class and was proud of his work. He wanted to staple it together and add a cover. He signed his name with *Badas and Booms* and added the symbols for the *Star Wars* 'Imperial March' at the bottom. His dad was very proud of his work and borrowed the book to show his co-workers.

The father sent a note back to school:

I'm really proud of my son's ability to recognize rhythms. I'm so proud that he was able to write down the music notes all on his own. We are all really proud that he is inspiring not only his sisters to learn about music and rhythm but also his friends at school. We are grateful for Miss Dulce and [the preschool]. (personal communication, February 2020)

Collectively, Shimkus and I discovered how documentation can effectively contribute to the co-construction of classroom musical investigations. I was inspired by Shimkus's ability to support the ongoing musical interest in the classroom and empower the children to develop a rhythm language of their own. Together, we gave voice and agency to the children's musical interests and expressions, investigated the multi-modality of artistic expression, and made young children's inherent musicianship visible. We shared our experiences throughout the year with the LLC, both in large- and small-group settings. Through this, LLC members learned more about

co-creating musical experiences and the power of respecting everyone's perspective and expertise.

### ***Creating a Reciprocal Space: Exploring the Intersections with Others***

With the year-two goals of fostering collaborative professional development opportunities between teaching artists and early childhood educators in mind, LLC members and facilitators created an interdisciplinary professional development event that brought together artists and early childhood educators at the Musical Instrument Museum. The goal was to facilitate experiences that stimulated new thinking and interactions amongst the participants to scaffold paradigm shifts in the design of collaborations and catalyze alternative learning pathways. Intentionality around these goals was evidenced in the invitation, which featured language about investigating “the collaborative capacity of teaching artists and early childhood educators in supporting young learners as they encounter materials, ideas, other people, and themselves” and structuring the day with time for meaningful discourse and interactive presentations, activities, and reflection (Yu & April, 2020).

LLC members, accustomed to co-researching and collaborating, were joined by twenty-nine early childhood educators and ten teaching artists (representing musical, visual, and theater arts). The combined group of LLC members, early childhood educators, and teaching artists were intentionally mixed around large tables to promote an exchange of ideas between fields of knowledge. Attention was given to making the presentations multi-modal, which moved between lectures, hands-on activities, individual work, small and large group work, and time for exploration.

### ***Where Teaching Begins***

Dr. Yu shared a presentation titled “Children as Contemporary Artists” which emphasized thinking beyond limited notions about children's artistic endeavors. Loris Malaguzzi (1994), founder of the Reggio Emilia schools, challenges educators and community members to look within themselves to realize the image of the child. According to Malaguzzi (1994), this is where teaching begins. If educators see children as only capable of prescribed activities, followers of step-by-step, directed experiences, then this is how they will design and organize art education. Yu challenged the audience with the following provocations: How might the design of early childhood arts education models change when young children are considered contemporary artists capable of creating their own artistic processes and meanings? What if children were already viewed as artists instead of future artists? Early childhood educators and teaching artists must address these fundamental questions individually and collaboratively as they begin a partnership.

Participants were invited to reflect on documentation in the forms of photographs, video recordings, and children's artworks collected during Yu's collaboration with 3–5-year-old children and an early childhood educator during a four-month investigation of collaborative painting processes (Yu & Schiefelbein, 2019). New understandings emerged for the participants while reflecting on the documentation regarding children's unique artistic processes, the role of materials (paint and brushes) in meaning-making, and the roles of the artist and educator. Participants noted the depth of collaboration between Yu as the teaching artist and Schiefelbein as the early childhood educator in observing, documenting, asking questions, and giving children time to come up with solutions and ideas. Some of the participants' discoveries included:

- Documentation can be revisited with new eyes and new meanings, and each time it is studied can produce new knowledge and ideas.
- Documentation supports collaboration between teaching artists, early childhood educators, and children.
- Documentation makes children's unique individual and collaborative artistic approaches visible.

### *Experiencing Open-Endedness*

Next, LLC members designed provocative experiences for the participants to explore, experiment with, and research a wide variety of materials and instruments. Reggio Emilia educators often refer to the environment as the third teacher, meaning that learning spaces have the capacity for provoking curiosity, wonder, and exploration when intentionally designed (Rinaldi, 2021). As such, the LLC members designed spaces with drawing materials and surfaces organized to promote individual and collaborative explorations (see Figure 6). In a separate space, one of the Musical Instrument Museum's hands-on galleries was reserved for exploring and researching musical instruments and sounds (see Figure 7). Although some of the drawing materials and instruments were familiar, participants were challenged to approach them as if they were new. The LLC members served as observers and documenters through photography and video recordings. We wondered how adults, both educators and artists, would react to exploring expressive materials in such an open-ended way.





Figure 6 (left). drawing materials; Figure 7 (right). musical materials.

### *Documentation as Discovery*

Lastly, the museum was a place of discovery through observation, documentation, and reflection. The participants were divided into four small groups, including at least one LLC member, to provoke engagement while practicing the art of listening and noticing. Each group was given a different documentation task: recording sounds in the museum, sketching mouthpieces from different instruments, sketching drums from different cultures, or photographing details of the physical environment. After observing and collecting documentation in the museum, time was allotted for each small group to discuss how each modality—photographing, sketching, and recording—contributed to creating awareness. Each participant’s documentation led to collective insights regarding the museum, and the conversation naturally led to the participants discussing documentation within their contexts as artists and educators.

### *Reflections of Shifted Thinking*

In an exit slip modeled on thinking routines developed at Harvard Project Zero (Ritchhart et al., 2011) participants were asked to consider shifts in their thinking through the prompts:

- “I used to think the intersection between early childhood and the fine and performing arts meant. . .”
- “I now think. . .”
- “What moved my thinking?”



The prompts provoked participants to explore how and why their thinking regarding early childhood art education partnerships may have changed during the Musical Instrument Museum (MIM) event. This protocol also allowed organizers the opportunity to look for the most meaningful takeaways of the day. Responses on the exit slips captured some significant changes in how the educators and teaching artists had come to think about arts experiences with children (see Table 2 below).

**Table 2**

*Participants' Exit Slip Responses*

<b>Shifts in thinking related to:</b>	<b>Participant Quote</b>
Collaborative approaches	"I used to think music and arts specialists were directive and that the arts were to be implemented by teachers only. Now I think that teaching artists and classroom teachers should collaborate to incorporate inquiry-based learning in classrooms that children are interested in."
Importance of collaboration	"I used to think artistic activities were more edutainment – now I think collaboration with teachers can be fruitful for artistic education."
Way of thinking about classroom music and art instruction	"I used to think music and art was more teacher directed. Now I think music and art is more of a way of thinking, not a direct lesson."
Children's capabilities and contributions	"I used to think children didn't make real contributions to the artworld – but now I think they see the world as animated; they are bigger risk takers, they give failure no thought, and because of these things they make the biggest kinds of contributions to the art world."

**End of Year Two: Collaborative Reflections**

In the spring of 2020, we completed the second year of the PAR project, which also corresponded with the early months of the pandemic. Many of the LLC members were working from home and in isolation. However, this was a significant opportunity to reflect on the prior years and to consider what we learned together. Members met virtually to discuss potential findings. With guidance and facilitation from Colunga, Yu, and Aprill, LLC members articulated how the group might assume greater leadership in moving early childhood arts education forward in their communities.

In particular, new ideas emerged to include approaches toward creating collaborative and reciprocal professional development structures between early childhood contexts, cultural institutions, and professional teaching artists. In addition, LLC members identified a greater understanding of artistic languages as inspiration for teaching and learning. As noted by one early childhood educator:

Collaboration with practicing artists who are invested in learners' growth, but are working from an artist's point of view, helps us think more creatively as we experiment with new approaches and ideas. I learned about artists, techniques, and ways to extend the experience. (personal communication, April 30, 2020)

As a result of this investigation, the LLC created guiding principles for others to consider when embarking upon collaborative arts-embedded work in early childhood. Each role and corresponding note were generated by members based on findings. The principles reflect the importance of collaborative ways of working both outside and inside early childhood classrooms. The third space referred to by Stevenson & Deasy (2005) reflects professional development where classroom teachers and artists are supported to learn alongside each other, allowing for reciprocal knowledge to be recognized while developing processes that significantly impact arts-based inquires with children. When collaborative and reciprocal professional development structures are supported, sustainable approaches towards co-creating emergent arts-based inquiries among children, teaching artists, and classroom teachers can develop.

### *Collaborative and Reciprocal Forms of Professional Development*

- **The role of collaborative, reflective practice as professional growth and development for both artists and classroom teachers with support from a facilitator.** Reggio Emilia educators' commitment to collaborative professional development through ongoing observation, documentation, and reflection between teaching artists and classroom teachers with the support of a facilitator (*pedagogista*) provides inspiration for going beyond the surface.
- **The role of co-researching arts materials, artistic processes, and arts spaces as adult learners.** When teaching artists and teachers engage in explorations of the arts together, new pathways for working collaboratively with children emerge.
- **The role of communities of practice to share classroom work.** Time spent reflecting on practice and documentation of children's choices with fellow practitioners within an ongoing professional community is essential for everyone's continuous growth as teachers, teaching artists, and learners.

### *Collaborative and Sustainable Approaches in Early Childhood Classrooms*

- **The role of ongoing collaborations between early childhood classrooms and teaching artists.** The importance of moving away from “one and done” teaching artist classroom visits should be emphasized to foster emergent and sustained inquiries with children.
- **The role of classrooms as laboratories.** Classroom experiences co-designed by teaching artists and classroom teachers with children become laboratories where new strategies can be explored.
- **The role of emergent learning for teaching artists, teachers, and children.** New ideas and discoveries emerge when children, teaching artists, and classroom teachers have opportunities to co-construct arts-based inquiries.

### *Collaborative and Sustainable Learning*

- **The role of mutual listening and mutual learning.** Above all, collaborations among children, teaching artists, classroom teachers, and cultural institutions are sustained when a “listening context” is created where “understanding and awareness are generated through sharing and dialogue” (Rinaldi, 2021, p. 39). It is vital to be able to listen to others and be listened to. Mutual listening is an essential element in any learning experience.

A significant outcome of the project was the recognition by the participating educators of the importance of their roles as leaders in sustaining collaborative approaches. One participant commented, “Leading learning takes courage to stand up for quality and for practice, values, and philosophies that genuinely advocate for every child and teacher to experience learning in a meaningful way.” Classroom teachers and arts educators should be recognized for their capabilities to co-construct meaningful arts collaborations that reflect their interests and those of the children and families in their classrooms.

### **Concluding Thoughts and Relaunching with New Ideas**

As evidenced, collaborative experiences in research as professional development *and* implementing practices in classroom spaces can yield impactful results. Although this project emphasized teaching artist and early childhood educator collaborations, we suggest this way of working within primary and secondary grade settings as well. Developing opportunities for classroom teachers and teaching artists to collaborate through their ongoing investigations leads to enriched experiences for children of all ages.

It’s important to note that there’s no “one-size-fits-all” approach, and educators/administrators must carefully consider their teaching environments and contexts. With that in mind, meaningful partnerships should be prioritized and given both time and space to develop, which requires appropriate resources. The expectation cannot be for teaching artists and educators to give

limitlessly of their time without compensation. We recognize that this paradigm shift does not come easily. It would require arts institutions to rethink the support offered to teaching artists regarding time spent not only in the classroom with children but also with teachers outside the classroom to engage in meaningful reflection and dialogue regarding pedagogical approaches. However, when teachers, artists, and early childhood organizations invest in opportunities for reciprocal learning and ongoing professional development, the potential for sustainable and authentic collaborations emerges.

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