
A form of listening

Independent reflections on Kids' Own's
Arts in Early Years initiative, 2024–25

by Dr. Bryonie Reid

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Contents

5	Introduction
6	Reflecting
7	Looking and listening
9	Practice
10	Relationships
13	Partnering
15	Freedoms
16	Materials
18	Engaging
19	Ownership
22	Making space
24	Collaborating
29	Next Steps



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Introduction

Kids' Own Associate Artists have been working with childcare practitioners¹ in two pre-school settings, the Holy Family Day Centre and Inspiring Minds, in Sligo. Pre-school settings accept children aged between two years and eight months, and five years and six months. Both health and education practitioners at the Holy Family Day Centre care for and support children with illnesses and disabilities. Inspiring Minds provides 'an emergent curriculum' influenced by Reggio Emilia, an approach to education which foregrounds and follows the child's curiosity and capacities.²

Three artists – Naomi Draper, Maree Hensey and Ruth Le Gear – worked in these settings in 2024 and 2025. Naomi and Maree were present together in a series of sessions at Inspiring Minds and another series of sessions at the Holy Family Day Centre. Ruth was present alone in a second series of sessions at Inspiring Minds, with support before and after sessions from Naomi and Maree.

Artists brought their own practices to the work, with a carefully considered and planned invitation to children to explore materials and processes from their studios. Practitioners advised and supported the children's engagement. Children were given time and space to engage as they liked. Sometimes children led the exploration in unexpected directions. Artists adapted and improvised in response.

Artists chose objects and materials to bring to the settings for their different qualities. Some seemed ordinary. Others were beautiful, rare, or precious. They included ice, water, various papers, edible inks and dyes, printing inks, watercolour pencils, sponges, rollers, torches, tape, elastic bands, herbs, shells and pebbles. Objects and materials took on new meanings in interactions with artists, practitioners, children and each other. The images record these interactions and their results.



1 All further references to 'practitioners' within this document can be taken to mean 'childcare practitioners'.

2 <https://www.facebook.com/p/Inspiring-Minds-Preschool-100068647183998/>, accessed 4th November 2025.

Reflecting

Artists and practitioners reflected on their experiences and observations as they worked, and generously shared some of these reflections with me. They present thoughts and feelings ranging from the immediate and unedited to the processed and considered. All are insightful.

In the artists' reflections I saw them working out together how to bring and share their practices, their objects and materials, their sense of meaning, while leaving space for children and practitioners to engage with, take on, discard and re-shape those practices, objects, materials and meanings. A pattern of practice emerged. Artists made themselves present and invited engagement. They waited for practitioners and children to be ready to engage. They looked and listened for responses, and in turn responded to those. They reflected, to deepen their understanding of what had happened and how to adapt. Then they reworked their plans, materials and processes. In the practitioners' reflections I saw how they disposed themselves with openness towards artists and art practice, began to relate, interpreted interactions and gently negotiated the collaboration, with trust and respect.

Here I offer some of my own reflections on what I heard and saw of the work artists and practitioners undertook together with children in two settings. Reflections indeed function as a mirror, a way of seeing practice and process from a little distance, in a different way. Mine are shaped by learning about the work after it happened, and making my own interpretations of artist-practitioner conversations. I am reflecting on the work and what it means, to and for artists, practitioners and children.

I do not reproduce the reflections of artists and practitioners, but they inflected and enriched my thinking and I am grateful. I do reproduce some of the words of artists and practitioners, as spoken to me and each other. I chose particular words because they articulated the experience of the work directly and eloquently. I wanted to include the voices of the people who did the work. I represent them where possible and appropriate as fragments of dialogue, the productive back-and-forth of collaboration and reflection.³

As I listened, some key themes emerged. I have organised my reflections, and narrative from artists and practitioners, as they relate to these themes.

³ Words spoken by artists and practitioners are drawn from conversations at Inspiring Minds, Blend Café and Holy Family Day Centre in Sligo on 25th and 26th September and presented with their permission. They are lightly edited for concision and clarity, and attributed generally to artist or practitioner, not to named individuals.

Looking and listening

Paying attention is part of art practice, and part of looking after young children. At the Holy Family Day Centre, childcare and healthcare practitioners care for children who are non-verbal and vulnerable because of illness or disability. Including healthcare workers and educators, all practitioners paid close attention to children to determine moment by moment how they felt and what they wanted or needed. Staff at Inspiring Minds attended to children too. They were concerned with safety, but also followed the Reggio Emilia model, which asks practitioners to respond to children's interests, ideas and actions.

Artists pay attention to ideas, materials and processes. They were not present in the settings to show their own work, nor to instruct children in producing an art output. They were there to open their art practices and welcome children in. That meant paying attention to settings, practitioners and children to find the place for artists and art in and among them. Artists observed the daily routine and worked out how to be present and contribute without unsettling it. They attended to children's communications during and between sessions.

‘You noticed. You would go home and think. You observed and you realised they liked little things that were wrapped up and small. You would come in next day with little things that they loved.’
–Childcare practitioner

‘Are we listening through touch, are we listening through their engagement? Looking is a form of listening. I’m interested in the idea of the material listening.’ –Artist

Artists talked about how to receive these communications. Sometimes it was a matter of listening, sometimes of looking. Sometimes artists were using their whole bodies and their instincts to identify and understand the ebbs and flows of the children's attention. Practitioners listened and looked and used intuition too, especially with non-verbal children. Looking, listening, responding and adapting require a lot of energy from practitioners and artists. Children benefit by being seen and heard and given the opportunity to engage in their own way at their own pace.

‘You don’t always have the right answers, it’s a bit of a guessing game, a process of elimination, but a lot of the time they can let you know what they want, and definitely what they don’t want.’ –Artist

‘We were listening to the day. Often we thought, let’s just embrace this. We were discovering as we went along. When one thing wasn’t working we moved on to another.’ –Artist

Practice

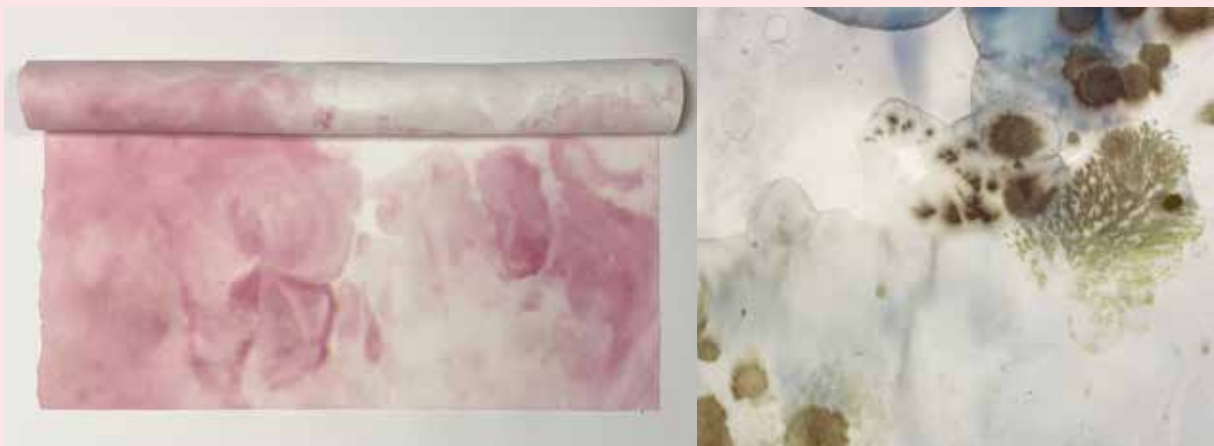
Kids' Own and Associate Artists value artists' practice. In projects like this, artists expect to share their practice, but more than that, they expect their practice to be affected by the process. Here, artists established reciprocity. They brought themselves and their practice to the setting. They took the setting and their experiences there back to their studios. They dwelt on the children's voices and silences, curiosity and eagerness, reticence and joy. They spent time with what the children made, and on their interactions with the materials.

‘This work is connected to who I am as a person, to my practice. The non-verbal communication, just quietness and really listening, was beyond anything I’ve ever done.’ –Artist

‘I felt met in my practice. Maybe more so than I’ve ever experienced.’ –Artist

By training and inclination, artists could operate by senses and instinct in a process, and had the patience to remain in it, without hurrying to an output or outcome. In this way they developed an understanding of their collaboration with practitioners and children, and opened their practice to its influence. They were able, while maintaining appropriate boundaries, to be openly and truly themselves, with the vulnerability that entails.

In these processes, artists are learning about who they are, what they do and make, and the materials they use. For an artist to develop their practice in this collaborative way, practitioners' approaches, attitudes and engagement are key.



Relationships


Relationships open up and then deepen the possibility of working meaningfully together. Forming relationships is a delicate process that takes time, but a connection sufficient to essay collaboration can be made quite simply and quickly.

Prior to this project, practitioners at Inspiring Minds took part in a weekend workshop facilitated by one of the Associate Artists. That experience led them to seek out a project with Kids' Own. They knew they liked the artist's way of working and that it would fit their setting, and it was enough to begin a joint process. Likewise, one artist encountered a child at Inspiring Minds whom she remembered from a workshop she had facilitated and knew from her experience of him that the setting likely would work well for her.

Relationships grew as artists and practitioners got to know each other through being and doing together in the settings. This was not by accident, but by intention, effort and sensitivity to each other's practices and responsibilities. Artists thought deeply about how to connect with practitioners amid all the other claims on their time and attention. Relationships and trust are entwined. With adults who trusted each other in the space and the work, children felt secure enough to explore and experiment. Each moment of interaction with a child offered artists a chance to relate to them too, gently and with respect. As artists were not care-givers, these relationships were necessarily time-bound and focused on materials and processes, but that did not diminish their value in supporting children to express and enjoy their creativity.

‘We went in and observed, and really tried to reassure them that we would be taking the lead from them. Then a trust began. We would leave our materials there, overnight, and then the staff were around those things a lot more. There was a trace of something after we'd gone. It helped with some of that trust.’ –Artist

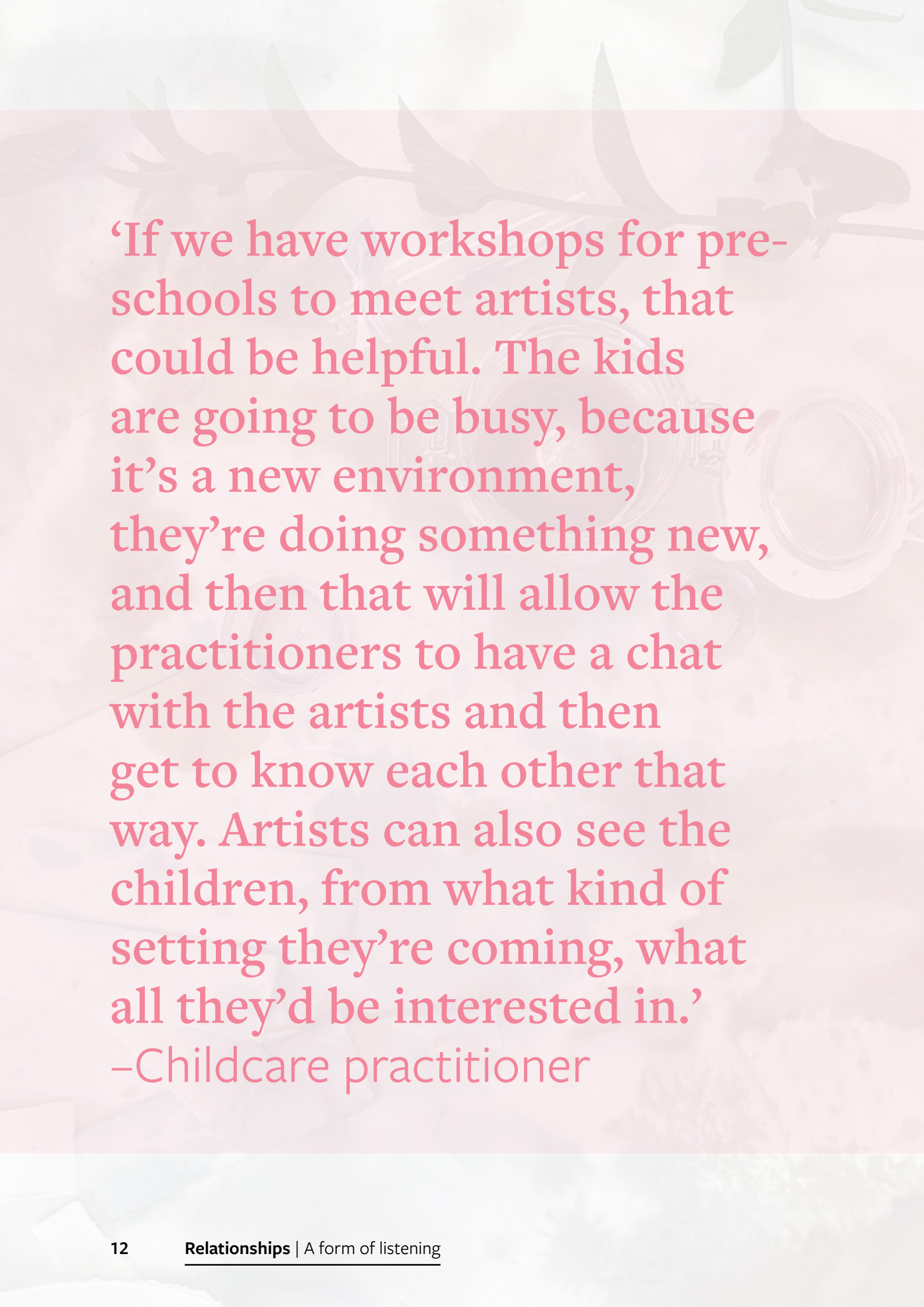
‘The practitioner was going back into the rooms and sharing the images we were sending, the record of the day's work. It just felt like our presence was there all the time.’ –Artist



‘I became comfortable here because when I came in one morning, I met a boy who’d been in a workshop that I’d done. I remember him so specifically because we were doing a portrait workshop, and he’d no interest in doing the portrait. He built something with charcoal and masking tape and a piece of paper, and he was bouncing the paper to make the charcoal draw on another page. It was amazing. And when I saw him, I knew this was an amazing place. That’s when I settled in.’ –Artist

‘You were doing this beautiful session with clay, and I knew I’d love to work with you.’
–Childcare practitioner

‘Between all of our relationships, we managed to communicate to the children, this is okay, this is safe.’ –Artist



‘If we have workshops for pre-schools to meet artists, that could be helpful. The kids are going to be busy, because it’s a new environment, they’re doing something new, and then that will allow the practitioners to have a chat with the artists and then get to know each other that way. Artists can also see the children, from what kind of setting they’re coming, what all they’d be interested in.’
–Childcare practitioner

Partnering

Naomi and Maree were able to work together at Inspiring Minds and the Holy Family Day Centre, while Ruth worked alone in the setting, supported by planning and reflecting with Naomi and Maree.

Both artists and practitioners noticed and intuited the differences in working together and working alone. Practitioners are used to working with each other, a necessity in childcare settings, especially with young children and children with additional needs. They are aware of the benefits of having colleagues in the room, other adults with values, intentions and understandings of the work that match or complement their own.

Naomi and Maree agreed that the special considerations needed in working with children at the Holy Family Day Centre required their collaboration. Many of the children were non-verbal, and many were at high risk from their health conditions. In working together at Inspiring Minds, the artists had developed ways to communicate with each other moment by moment, across the room, with body language. At the Holy Family Day Centre, this capacity was crucial as they learned to interact non-verbally with the children too. Working with artists and their art practice was new to children and practitioners. Artists carried significant responsibility – to relate to practitioners, to integrate themselves and their practices into the setting and routine, to make sure materials and processes were safe for children, to notice and respond to how children received them, to plan, adapt and improvise session by session. With two artists, this weight was shared.

Ruth was helped by Naomi and Maree, and by Inspiring Minds practitioners who had already worked with Naomi and Maree, and understood, valued and welcomed art practice in the setting. However, the practitioners saw the increase in pressure on a lone artist, and Ruth felt it.

‘When there’s two of you, you’re right across the room, and you can let things change quite quickly.’
–Artist

‘It wouldn’t be as overwhelming for you, if you had a colleague.’ –Childcare practitioner

Collaboration with a fellow artist makes more expansive, deeper and richer work possible. Two artists can relate to practitioners and children differently, and therefore more fully. They can observe and understand better what is happening in the room with materials and processes. They are more agile, more responsive to children’s interests and energies. They can reflect more deeply together on their shared but varied experience, and adapt more effectively.

‘Everybody has a different way of communication, so certain children would pick up on things that I might say or the energy that I’d *be* in a room, certain children would pick up on the other artist’s.’ –Artist

‘When I’m alone, I know I feel like all eyes are on me, all the pressure is on me, I’d better come up with something good!’ –Childcare practitioner

‘When we would reflect together, it’s so much more of a supportive situation. You’re able to really critically look at what to change.’ –Artist

‘I definitely couldn’t have done it without calling them [the artist mentors] before and after each session, and having other conversations around it.’ –Artist

‘There was no way we would be able to be in that setting without each other. We needed to be there together.’ –Artist



Freedoms

Neither Inspiring Minds nor the Holy Family Day Centre impose a formal curriculum. Because of their children's additional needs, Holy Family practitioners remain very open to what they want and need and have capacity for in the moment. That meant artists could work in both settings intuitively and developmentally. They were able to test materials and processes and make changes based on how they saw children responding. They did not have to demonstrate how materials and processes helped fulfil curriculum requirements. They did not have to work at set times for set periods. They could allow for and adapt to conditions in the settings on a session-by-session basis. Themselves free from the demands of following a formal curriculum, practitioners were able to meet and explore materials and processes alongside children. Further, they were free to adopt and incorporate some of these into their own work in the settings.

‘The process just ran its course. And then we’d leave. So we were never tied to a session of a certain length, and they really appreciated that. It just happened, and if it took an hour-and-a-half for somebody to finish their Rice Krispies, that was grand. We were just there.’ –Artist



Materials

Reflecting together, artists and practitioners dwelt on the materials introduced and explored in the settings. Artists' selection and use of materials were distinct to their practices. Practitioners appreciated the quality of artists' materials, unusual in education settings because of limited resources. Both saw what high-quality and considered materials meant for children. Certain materials could be seen as artists' allies. They encouraged children to discern their qualities and capacities, and to test those. When beautiful, or sensorily interesting, they made a process more appealing. They made children's marks more precise, or lasting. They provided for safe experimentation. At Inspiring Minds, practitioners noticed that watercolours preserved children's distinct actions and choices in a process of building up an image on one sheet of paper. They revealed rather than concealed all that went into creating the end image. At the Holy Family Day Centre, artists brought edible materials – water and ice, herbs and flowers, inks and dyes made from plants – to ensure that children with tendencies to bring objects to their mouths could use them freely without risk. Artists think carefully about the materials they use in their own practice. They work with, as well as on, materials. They allow materials to suggest and shape practice. They brought all this thinking and doing to the choice of materials to share in the settings. Relationships and trust were entangled with materials and processes, not least because artists were offering their authentic selves through materials and processes. It made me wonder whether children were able to take ownership of materials and processes through relationships, because they had built up trust with artists. While materials provide sensory experiences, stimulate curiosity and lead into exploration, relationships provide the ground from which to confidently explore. Practitioners too were enabled to try new materials and find new possibilities for familiar materials. Independently of each other, both artists and practitioners increasingly considered the sustainability of certain materials, and how to introduce awareness and care for a material's life cycle into the work.



‘We ended up purchasing things like you have, the watercolour pencils? They’re fabulous. It’s important, because then the art that they make doesn’t disappear. Process art is beautiful, but the process gets lost as they work.’ –Childcare practitioner

‘For children to use really beautiful materials, is so important. It’s sort of an investment.’ –Artist

‘We’d love to have continually high-quality materials, but you have to provide them out of your own pocket. Even to get paint, like poster paint. So it’s unrealistic.’ –Childcare practitioner

‘Those inks that were meant to be washable! And their hands! But the joy.’ –Artist

‘And that’s all that matters!’ –Childcare practitioner

‘Something I think about too is the idea of the material as active participant. I keep coming back to that – the potential to listen to the material. I even felt that the natural materials had a certain calmness.’ –Artist

Engaging

Here, I step back and put forward practitioners' voices, as the adults who knew the children best and observed their experiences during and after the sessions with artists. They speak for children's engagement fully and with nuance and sensitivity.

Their observations tell eloquently of the value of artists and art practices in education settings. It is clear that children engaged differently, often deeply, beyond the sessions themselves, and in some transformational ways. The children's curiosity, joy, courage and insight are palpable. Practitioners shared in their excitement and enjoyment. They noticed how the artists enabled and supported them to engage.

'You delicately became part of the morning routine, and they felt more comfortable, because you weren't changing the routine that they were used to.' –Childcare practitioner

'You always made it really beautiful. Beautiful and approachable.' –Childcare practitioner

'One boy, we were painting, and he was like, no, I don't want to do that, and needed to be really clean. And at the end he had paint from like head to toe.' –Artist

'For each child, the magic happened at a different time. Every child had their own experience and their own thoughts and ideas of what was happening.' –Childcare practitioner

'We started the activity with one intention, and then they took it in a whole other direction.'
–Childcare practitioner

Ownership

Artists are in these pre-school settings to share their practices. They are not imposing art on children, or directing children to do art. They are opening up materials and processes in the hope and expectation that children will engage and explore. Artists who work like this are willing to have their practices inflected and even changed by children's responses. When children take ownership and lead or continue with materials and processes in their own ways, the artist's openness is rewarded. Already disposed to give children the lead in activities, practitioners at Inspiring Minds found particular satisfaction in watching them experiment with materials and processes introduced by the artists. They noticed that this happened slowly, over time, as children worked through what had caught their attention or sparked their interest. In this setting, where children could work independently, overseen and supported by practitioners, they had time and space to play with the materials and processes in their own ways. The children were artists too.

‘Every child just goes at their own pace, and they see it all so differently. That’s where maybe some of the magic was happening – afterwards.’

–Childcare practitioner

‘Not having to direct it is great.’ –Artist

‘I’m just remembering something else and realising that was because of the artists! The children got a sponge, and then they got the idea to get a piece of paper. They wrapped up the sponge and then they got a marker, and they were making marks on it.’

–Childcare practitioner



‘I do think that they bring it on, as the weeks go on. Their interests continue. After being introduced to mark-making with water, months later they still come in and get water, and they go out to the chalkboard. Without even getting chalk, they just get water and a paintbrush and they’re off.’
–Childcare practitioner

‘Two or three kids would say, we need duct tape, we need duct tape, and I’d wonder, what is it for? And they were sticking all the paper all around the slides. I think they were inspired, remembering last year, the whole playground being covered in tape and paper. They absolutely loved it. Maybe they were trying to recreate it.’

–Childcare practitioner

Making space

Artists work differently from practitioners. They bring different ideas, processes and understandings into pre-school settings. In order to collaborate, they need to perceive and meet each other with mutual respect. They have to be open to each other's professional practice. While these practices will differ, overlaps in ethos, approach and methods help artists and art to adapt and embed without distortion.

At the Holy Family Day Centre and Inspiring Minds, this respect and openness was present, and made collaboration possible. Practitioners were aware of the potential impact, negative and positive, of additional adults, artists, in their settings. But they wanted the artists to be there, believing that artists and art would serve the children. Artists deferred to practitioners in their knowledge of individual children and the children as a group, and practitioners guided artists in fitting into the spaces and routines of the settings. Practitioners hosted artists, continuing to manage the settings and keep children safe while artists shared their practices and introduced children to materials and processes.

Further, practitioners understood their work in similar ways to how artists understood their work. Kindness and respect for children were central. Process was valued for its own sake. Materials were enjoyed and used with imagination and confidence. This laid the ground for a satisfying collaboration based on shared values and vision. Artists and practitioners could bypass questions of what art is, or whether it has value, or whether its value is as a means to an end (wellbeing, for example), and arrive at making art with children.



‘How do you marry an artist with a setting, or a setting with an artist? It’s a bit of a leap of faith. You don’t know if your practices are going to match.’ –Artist

‘Not doing anything can be important. Just being part of the routine. Just waiting for the day to unfold, waiting till the last Rice Krispie is eaten before we launch into something else.’ –Artist

‘I arrived, and you were doing your morning tables, and it was all about snow and ice, and so I was like, well, I can just fit right in to what we’re doing here.’ –Artist

‘It would be good to open up opportunities for the sector to engage with ways of working and processes, so that when practitioners decide to buy in, they have an understanding of the artist, and the artist’s practice and processes.’ –Artist

‘What I love in the early years sector is that you can go to so many different settings, and the environment looks different. They take from all these different ideas, and make their own practice. That’s one of the things that really excites me about working in early years, and one of the strongest aspects of it.’ –Artist

Collaborating

As artists and practitioners collaborate, the two practices meet in the children. But they remain distinct too. Artists and practitioners have their own areas of expertise. The artist does not become a practitioner, nor does the practitioner become an artist. The differences provide for meaningful collaboration, where each partner in the work brings distinct, though resonant, methodologies and understandings. They offer children something together that neither could offer alone. It means that partners depend on each other in the collaboration. Further, they learn from each other and each practice is enriched but not subsumed. This is key in best-practice collaboration, because its deepest value is in working with difference, not erasing it. If difference did not exist, collaboration would be less creative, less innovative and less exciting.

Artists met practitioners in a profound way at the Holy Family Day Centre and Inspiring Minds. The practitioners were open to art practice, and understood it both instinctively and consciously. They had their own reflective practice, too. They thought deeply about their work. That enabled the collaboration to function at various levels. Not only children, but also artists and practitioners, had a stimulating and satisfying experience. And this experience of collaboration left its trace on art and education practices, in studios and settings.

Artists were respected as artists, and practitioners as practitioners. Everyone was heard. This played out in a reflective discussion between artists and practitioners about what worked and what did not work among children in each setting. Both artists and practitioners agreed on basic definitions of ‘working’ and ‘not working’. Varying degrees of engagement and different (or no) outputs from children are part of the process of making art and not a sign of failure. The only way in which practitioners identified materials and processes as ‘working’ and ‘not working’ for children was practical, and concerned safety. This evidences how art and education practices offer different lenses through which to see and understand children’s experiences. When they combine, children are safely supported to explore. Effective collaboration takes time and effort, and comes into being through process. It ‘works’ when each partner brings themselves, meets the other, and learns.



‘We do a lot of art and stuff, but this is magical creativity, what the artists do, ours is quite basic. You would have more ideas. We’ve learned from you coming in, and now we’ve introduced some of what you do to our rooms.’ –Childcare practitioner

‘There was a different level of confidence among the practitioners. I didn’t feel like they were going, this is the art thing, they just were really confident, creative people. They were bakers, and gardeners.’ –Artist

‘We can all bring something to the table. It’s just nice to see different possibilities, it’s exciting.’ –Childcare practitioner

‘We’re not the arty ones, but I’d give anything a whirl.’ –Childcare practitioner

‘We appreciate transparency, and honesty, where we can work together, and that’s something really unique.’ –Artist

‘I think as artists you have a deep understanding of the importance of art. And I think the importance of art in the early years is not just about template handprints for parents to go home to, it’s about the children, their experience. It’s pre-literacy. They can’t write yet, they can’t read yet, and that’s how they express themselves.’ –Childcare practitioner

‘I always get excited about bringing something from the studio in here. You find another exchange between practices. I learn so much by being in these spaces, from you, but also from the children.’ –Artist

‘We reflect every evening on what we’ve done that day. Just so we can have a grasp of each child. I think it’s so important. Otherwise we’re going in blind every day.’ –Childcare practitioner

‘Whatever we work on is what we bring. And then it changes, and you bring it back into your studios.’ –Artist

‘How do we communicate better? It’s an honesty.’ –Artist

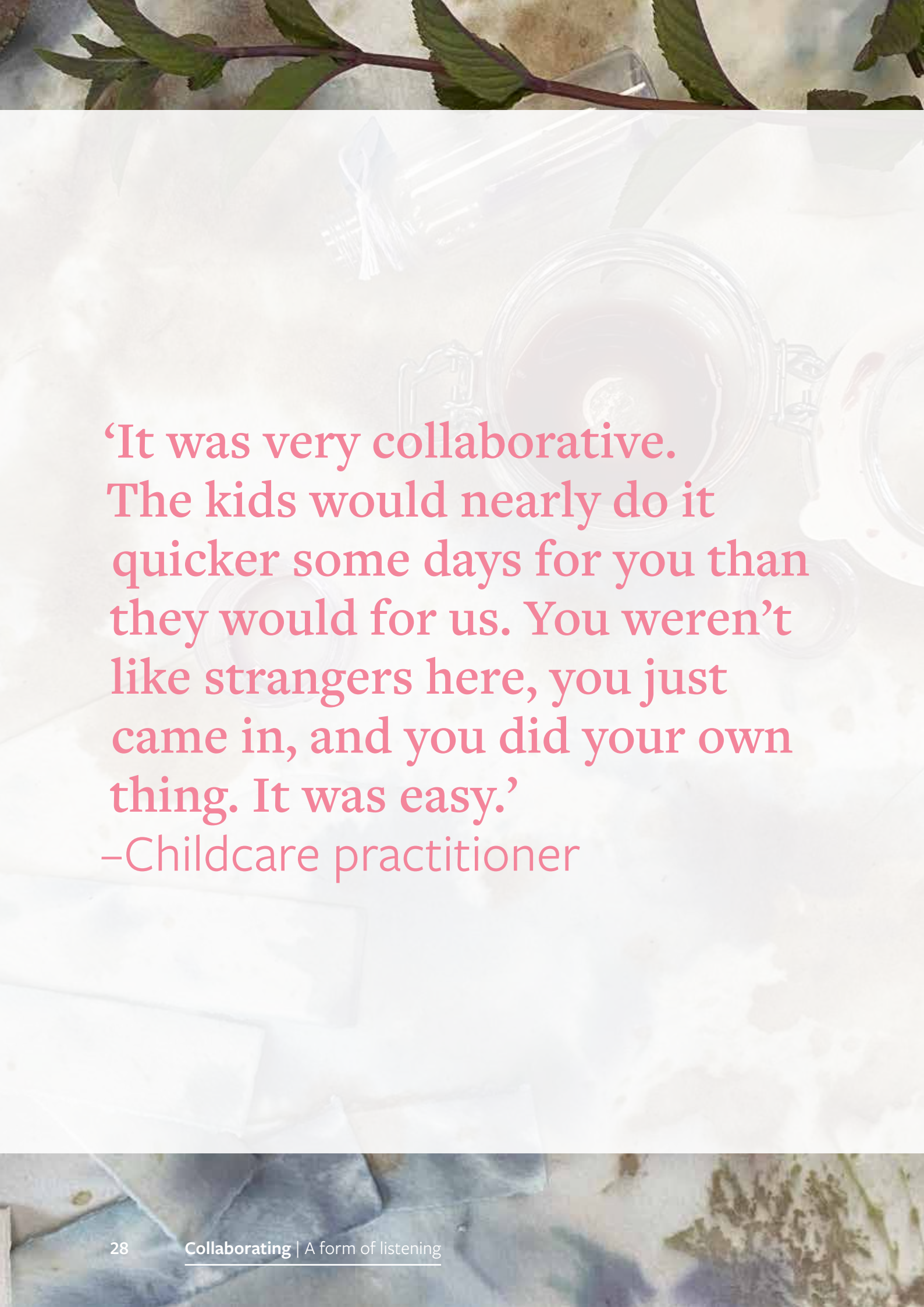
‘There was one thing that I did notice. It was when you wrapped the little pebbles. They looked like sweets. And when they were unwrapping, I was like, oh wait! Please don’t put that in your mouth, that is dangerous.’ –Childcare practitioner

‘I felt from all of you real creativity.’ –Artist

‘We actually see that it could become even more collaborative, with this particular setting.’ –Artist

‘Like our eyes are wandering. We are chatting but we’re like, is she climbing up there, putting something in her mouth, that looks like a pair of sharp scissors.’ –Childcare practitioner

‘In an early years setting, the practitioner is more concerned about the safety of the kids because they’re so much younger. At Holy Family, it’s life or death for some of those kids. You’re an artist in the space, so where do we find the time to have those connections, those conversations that connect us and our practices?’ –Artist



‘It was very collaborative.
The kids would nearly do it
quicker some days for you than
they would for us. You weren’t
like strangers here, you just
came in, and you did your own
thing. It was easy.’
–Childcare practitioner

Next steps

The work undertaken by artists and practitioners with children, supported by Kids' Own, has been rich, with scope to deepen over time. In the current phase, the three artists continue collaborating with practitioners at Holy Family Day Centre and Inspiring Minds. The possibility of spreading the work to other settings is being explored.

Questions remain. How might artists and practitioners meet? How might they discover enough about each other to know a collaborative relationship is possible? How might they be supported to develop those relationships? How might long-term collaborations function, and how could they serve artists, practitioners and children? What effect might this collaborative work have on early years education and on art practice, as well as on the individuals involved? Seeking some answers to these questions (and others) will deepen understanding of what is happening in and through this project, and suggest how best to direct, develop and support it.





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