

## In the picture

Following an increased engagement in visual art during the pandemic, how can early years settings continue to support children's creativity, asks **Charlotte Goddard**

**I**n the early days of the pandemic, children's art seemed to be more visible than ever before. From chalk pictures on the pavements to painted stones placed in a line, their creativity was on display throughout the

community. Arts and community organisations shared activities and resources through social media and their own websites.

'Among my mum friends, there was a huge push around arts and crafts activities during the initial shutdown,' says Emma-Jo Bairstow, founder of Artworks Education.

Researchers from Yale University found that parents in the US and in South Korea prioritised arts and crafts over other parent-child interactions during school closures, and noted that sales of arts and crafts toys had increased. Some children

enjoyed being able to spend as long as they wanted on an activity, rather than having to put aside their project and move on to phonics or numeracy as they might have had to at school.

'It's really positive that children will have been able to engage with the things they are doing for longer,' says Ms Bairstow. 'Art in school can be so time-restricted.'

Many schools sent activities to children which they could carry out at home with their parents. Ms Bairstow, for example, produced videos aimed at nursery and Reception children. 'It was a planned activity, focused on butterflies, that sort of led to an outcome, but parents and children could take it where they wanted,' she says. 'I loved seeing what the children sent back, and how they went in their own directions.'

### CALL FOR RENEWED FOCUS ON ART

Across the world, a number of projects have been set up to encourage and celebrate children's pandemic art.

In the UK, Arts Council England and Google founded The Way I See It, an online exhibition created by children and young people between the ages of two and 28 during lockdown. Meanwhile, Colchester's Firstsite gallery is organising the nationwide The Great Big Art Exhibition, encouraging children and adults to create themed works of art to display in their windows.

### Barriers to engagement

However, not all children were able to engage more with art during lockdown. Families might not have had the time, space



Activities such as spin painting can be more enjoyable for those children who are daunted by formal approaches to art

and resources to take part in art activities. Some schools were able to tackle this by sending packs of resources home, or by specifying only items that can be found around the house.

While some parents might have felt more confident supporting their children with creative activities during lockdown, others prioritised numeracy and literacy.

'In my experience, it was largely the academic stuff parents focused on,' says Ruth Smith, assistant head at Woodland Grange Primary School in Leicester. 'A lot were saying "I am a working parent, there is so much to fit in, we will just do the maths and English and that will keep them ticking over"'

### A Cinderella subject

Even before the pandemic, arts education in schools was not all it could be. Fabian Society research published in 2018 found a dramatic decline in both the quantity and quality of arts education in primary schools in England.

More recently, Isobel Traunter, postgraduate teaching assistant at UCL Institute of Education, interviewed teachers as part of research into visual art's position in the early years curriculum. They described visual arts in the EYFS as 'pressured', 'squashed', 'an afterthought' and 'sidelined'.

During the pandemic, organisations that usually go into schools to support early years arts activities have not been able to do so. 'We haven't had so much connection with early years settings in our projects this year as most activity was curtailed,' says Gina Westbrook, director of early years creativity at charity Take Art. Meanwhile, consultancy Earlyarts lost all of its schools contracts and had to close.

However, says Ms Westbrook, 'there is a growing body of thought and enquiring practice that supports early years creativity.'



## case study: Woolenwick Infant and Nursery School, Stevenage

A small, two-form entry Infant and Nursery School, Woolenwick's pedagogy is based on the work of education pioneers such as Friedrich Froebel and Loris Malaguzzi.

'We plan in the moment, responding to the children's observations, questions and wonderings, understanding that children are competent and capable of constructing their own theories, giving them agency over their own learning,' says head teacher Usha Dhorajiwala.

'Successful projects are those that provoke children's creative thinking and problem-solving, open to different avenues of exploration. Project-based work may last a day, a week, a month, or even longer, as long as the children have an interest.'

During lockdown, for example, keyworker children still attending school noticed plants growing through the cracks in the concrete in the playground. These were able to grow because the grounds contractor had been furloughed.

'The children did not know the names of these beautiful, unexpected plants and so invented their own, such as Pink Fire, Green Spike and (drawing on former knowledge) Little Bluebell,' says Christina Anderson, inclusion leader and specialist leader in cultural education. As they researched, children discovered the plants' names and labelled them in chalk, made drawings of flower friends for them in chalk and read to them to keep them company, as well as watering them.

Later, they wanted to create greetings cards to reconnect with friends, family and elderly neighbours. They researched local artists who paint flowers, observing and discussing their different techniques, and then made still-life drawings and paintings of cut flowers in a chosen media. The artwork was professionally printed into blank greetings cards.

The manager of the Co-op Funeralcare in Stevenage Old Town



created a window gallery of the children's artwork, forming part of the national The Great Big Art Exhibition (see Further information).

Many children personified the virus in their drawing and writing. Four-year-old Chelsea, for example, drew an angry face, saying, 'This is an angry coronavirus germ. We must wash our hands!'; and five-year-old Ellie decorated a picture of her hand with coloured circles, explaining, 'These are the coronavirus germs. They will make me poorly. I have to wash them.'



# EYFS best practice in schools

Educators and artists are calling for a renewed focus on the arts in schools as a response to the emotional fallout of the coronavirus pandemic. Many schools are prioritising creative arts as part of a 'recovery curriculum' designed to support children post-pandemic. Arts and creative activities play a key role in helping children and young people explore their emotions without the need to use words, and in building the supportive relationship a child or young person needs to become more open to learning.

'Art allows children to express themselves but also to maintain a safe distance from their experiences,' says Dani Lawson, relationship manager at Thrive, an organisation that works with schools to promote children's positive mental health. 'The arts provide a container for the child's experiences. This means that strong or difficult feelings and experiences can be seen and acknowledged (whether consciously or unconsciously) but they do not engulf or overwhelm the child.'

Sightlines Initiative encourages an enquiry-based approach to early childhood

education, emphasising the importance of learning in groups, of collaborative work, of research and creativity.

'We don't see separating things off as subject areas to be useful, whether that is arts or sciences,' says Robin Duckett, director of Sightlines. 'Learning then starts from the discipline rather than starting from human education and enquiry.'

Art may play a role as part of an enquiry, he says. For example, children at Woolenwick Infant and Nursery School in Stevenage made drawings of the flowers they saw growing in their playground, but they also researched their names and how to care for them (see Case study, page 35). Three- to five-year-olds at Co-op Academy Oakfield became interested in the elderly during the pandemic, and one child created an elaborate construction and announced that it was an 'old people's home'. Soon, other children became interested and a project emerged.

## BEST PRACTICE IN EARLY ART EDUCATION Striking a balance

While art can be part of a holistic project, or

a gateway into other curriculum areas, it is also important to see it as a subject in its own right, where children learn skills and build on them, says Anni McTavish, early years creative arts consultant.

'Progression is important,' she says. 'Rather than isolated activities throughout the year, look at it as a journey. What will children be comfortable and competent in as they move through the school?'

Good practice in early art education is about striking a balance between child- and adult-led activity, says Ms Bairstow. Her approach is to model an activity or skill for the children, such as drawing circles. 'Then you are able to have free flow but have the activity set up on a table, and they can come and look, or work with the teacher on a skill they modelled.'

While letting children explore and follow their own ideas is important, some can feel daunted by a blank page, says Ms McTavish. Matthew Sayer, senior curriculum consultant at Early Excellence, says transient art using loose parts can be a good way to ease the pressure on children who feel more wary. 'It frees the whole process up – a child

## case study: Kirkoswald C of E Primary School, Cumbria

A very rural primary school, with only 70 children, Kirkoswald combines its Reception and Year 1 classes. As the school is surrounded by countryside, nature is at the heart of the children's learning and exploration. The school has a topic for each term, and during the spring term, children focused on 'glorious beasts'.

'I wanted to bring in that connection with the natural world because it is something we value a lot at our school,' explains Class 1 teacher Catherine Reding. 'We decided to focus on birds and encouraged the children to really look at them. I felt it was important for the children's work to have meaning and purpose, and important for them to make connections.'

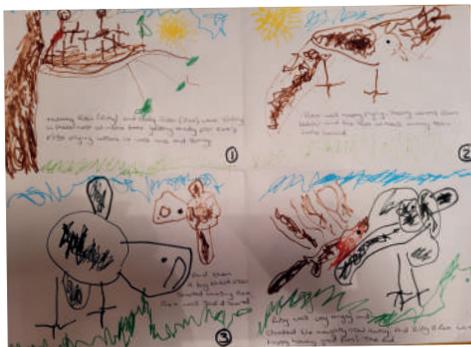
The project was rooted in children's real experiences. 'They were feeding the birds at home and looking for them on walks – they really grew to

love the birds and I could sense their enthusiasm and excitement as the project continued,' says Ms Reding.

During the spring term she suggested some activities for the children to try, but they were able to follow their own interests. Some created nests for them, others used cardboard boxes to create a story set and puppets. 'Children and teachers work together, with teachers encouraging children to be creative,' says Ms Reding. 'The idea of nests really sparked an interest for many children – maybe because of the idea of family. Later on in the project I encouraged children to create their own stories about their favourite bird, and accompany their stories with illustrations or models.'

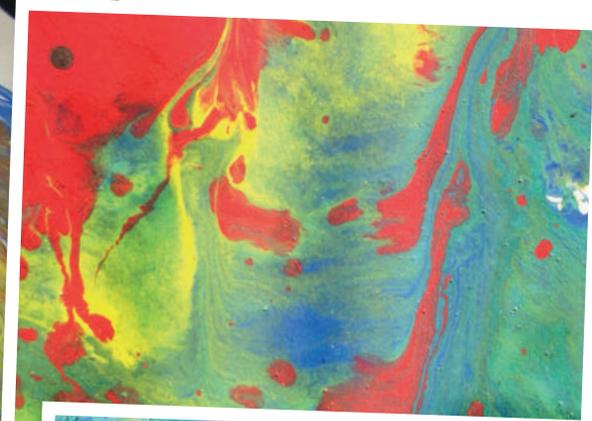
With most of the first months of 2021 spent in lockdown, much of the work was done by children at home. 'The activities enabled children to work with their parents whatever their abilities,' Ms Reding explains. 'We tried to make everything we did as accessible as we could so every family could take part in it in a way that suited them: we really wanted to turn the lockdown into an opportunity to work more closely with parents in a way we wouldn't normally do.'

There is no pressure within the school to prioritise phonics or numeracy above art. 'Some teachers will say "finish your writing then do a picture", but I often get them to do a picture first and then write about it,' says Ms Reding. 'I never want them to rush their picture and do it as an afterthought.'





Settings should focus on process rather than product in order to ensure that children's creativity is not hindered by adults' desire for conformity



can be creative and can change it quickly if they want,' he explains. 'You can take a photo of it.'

### Process over product

Some schools can have a tendency to focus on the product rather than the process, says Ms Smith. 'I see lots of staff doing the kind of art activity where all the children are doing the same thing,' she says, describing teachers guiding children's hands to obtain clear handprints. 'Creating an environment for children where they have to do something that looks like everyone else's has a disastrous knock-on effect on their creativity.'

This tendency is partly down to lack of training, Ms Smith believes. 'Many practitioners don't feel confident in the arts. They feel more comfortable looking at something on Pinterest and printing it out and reproducing it for every child,' she says.

There is also an element of meeting parental expectations. 'Some parents see it as a sign of children's progress to be getting a beautiful card where the child has written in it by tracing over words the teacher has written, and what they get is a splat that looks like nothing, and a child's mark-making, with an adult writing down what it says,' she says. 'A lot of education is needed with parents to help them understand the value of children's work.'

### CREATIVE THINKING Different media

While this article is focusing on visual arts,

children express themselves and communicate through music, movement and a wide range of materials, and the teaching of Expressive Arts and Design in the EYFS curriculum will need to cover all of this.

'I think just talking about visual arts can be limiting,' says Ms McTavish. 'What happens to those children who are visually impaired?' Schools need to think about how to support children with SEND to access the arts, including all of the senses.

Sixteen early years sector organisations have developed *Birth to 5 Matters*, which includes a number of good practice recommendations around Expressive Arts and Design, such as:

- Multi-sensory, first-hand experiences help children to connect and enquire about the world.
- Time, space and opportunities to revisit and reflect on experiences.
- Creative thinking involves original responses, not just copying or imitating existing artworks.
- Appreciating diversity and multiple perspectives enriches ways of thinking, being, and understanding.

Plans need to be flexible, to take in children's own interests. 'If a school has a plan in place which they keep repeating because they know it links to the curriculum, where when children come in they do self-portraits, then they will do some art related to a specific book, it will become stale,' says Ms McTavish. 'It is good to shake things up and respond to your

children, and also to think about what parents can offer – so often there are really good resources in a parental group.'

The way a school displays children's art is also important. 'Show them their work is valued,' says Ms Bairstow. Schools could invite parents to see children's work, or create floor books, with pictures of children engaged in making the art as well as the art itself.

'Let them be part of that process of storing and recording their learning journeys,' says Ms Bairstow. ■

#### FURTHER INFORMATION

- 'Arts and crafts as an educational strategy and coping mechanism for Republic of Korea and United States parents during the COVID-19 pandemic' by Meera Choi, Hannah Tessler and Grace Kao, *International Review of Education*, October 2020, <https://bit.ly/3hc80xf>
- The Great Big Art Exhibition, <https://bit.ly/3f6HcM5>
  - *Birth to 5 Matters*, <https://bit.ly/2RAK5N7>
  - *Development Matters* 2020, <https://bit.ly/3fmTYGD>