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Hearing from the early childhood arts sector about working with children under three

Research Report

Dr Jessica Pitt & Dr Charlotte Arculus

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1.0 Foreword

Appreciation and acknowledgement of the respondents' contributions to this report

This report has endeavoured to understand arts practice that listens to the way in which our youngest children know and understand the world. The generosity of the creative practitioners, cultural sector workers and organisations who responded to this survey has enabled us to gather together a wealth of experience and insight. Through these myriad perspectives a clearer picture of this highly specialised field has emerged and with it a set of recommendations on how to support, nurture and cross-pollinate this subtle and nuanced work, that is intergenerational by nature and involves working with sophisticated group dynamics across many modes of communication.

Early childhood creative practice can be overlooked and undervalued even by some of the institutions that employ the practitioners who have contributed to this study. However, it is clear that the fund of knowledge that resides in this sector has much to offer creative arts practice across multiple contexts.

2.0 Introduction

In July 2024, Sir Nicholas Serota, Chair, Arts Council England, proposed a five-point plan for the future of the arts in England. The five 'mission' areas have the goal of 'genuine renewal' of the arts and culture sector at their core (Serota, *The Guardian*, 2024). At the top of the list is the call for an 'early years arts intervention' (or 'Arts Start'); acknowledging that structures and expertise are already in place to initiate the scheme and stating that government collaboration would be needed to enable this initiative to be offered to every young child in the country.

This small-scale study was already well underway at the time of publication of Serota's article, yet the Durham Commission on Creativity and Education (2019), a partnership between Arts Council England and Durham University, provided plenty of evidence of the positive influence of creativity and imaginative thinking for human thriving, including the 0-4 age range.

'Recommendation 8' of the Durham Commission report (2019, p.24) calls for creativity and creative thinking to be recognised and encouraged in the early years (0-4 years). The report noted the great value of expressive arts in developing important characteristics for creativity, curiosity, problem solving and imagination, as well as playing a key role in the forming of identity and wellbeing (ACE, 2019, pp 46-47). This recommendation encourages a focus on creativity and expressive arts to redress the balance of the plethora of literature

and language-focused content that is available through broadcast media and other sources for young children.

The above demonstrates evidence of Arts Council England's interest in young children's equitable access to suitable arts and cultural opportunities where their creativity can flourish and have agency. In this vision the way in which young children express themselves must be understood as already creatively potent and be listened to and engaged with in multiple ways.

Early Years is a key priority for the Children, Young People & Learning team at Arts Council England who are committed to progressing Recommendation 8 of the Durham Commission Report. This small-scale study seeks to identify and summarise, through a myriad of respondent voices, examples of skilled and experienced creative practice with very young children (0-3 years) where the role of creativity is recognised and nurtured.

3.0 Executive Summary

3.1 Findings

3.1.1 Our Respondents

- 1 75% of respondents work in multiple contexts and have multiple roles. For example, they may be both artists and administrators, and they may also commission work. This hints at the characteristics of early childhood arts practice - often diverse and self-employed.
- 2 Arts practice with people under three is not limited to education contexts. There are societal, health and wellbeing, and community-building intentions for children and their caregivers who access the arts
- 3 60% of respondents have at least ten years' work experience with 0-3 yr olds. They are highly committed, several expressing how much they love this area of work. There is a rich wellspring of practical wisdom and knowledge that is not currently brought together in a purposeful way.
- 4 A varied and diverse theoretical basis is evident for creative practice amongst this sample of respondents. What comes through strongly is what we have termed *practice-wisdom*, that is to say the fruit of longevity of experience in working with children under three.

3.1.2 Listening to Children

- 5 Foregrounding young children's existing creative competence requires adults to 'listen' with all their senses as young children express themselves in myriad ways. Skilled early childhood arts practice is dependent on empathetic attention skills and multi-modal ways of listening and responding to young children.¹

¹ Multi-modal means that more than one sense is needed to listen to young children's creative expression. They may express themselves in many ways other than words and language. For example, their body movements, gesture, pointing, eye contact, vocalisations, play with objects, proximity, watching with interest, being comfortable with attention and in many other ways.

- 6 Young children’s ways of knowing the world include and go beyond oracy. Skilled and experienced creative/artistic practices enable full expressions of their multiple ways of knowing. However, it takes time and space to enable children to express themselves creatively and for adults to understand and respond to these forms of expression. There are some external challenges to the artists’ practices from society, caregivers, and settings.

3.1.3 Arts Council England’s 4 strategic themes

- 7 Cross-sector partnerships - Few organisations are well-resourced enough to maintain ongoing partnerships and skill sharing programmes. There is little currently in place to generatively cross-pollinate the wealth of skills and experience of the sector which needs some serious advocacy and investment into this majority-freelance workforce which currently has precious little capacity beyond scraping a living together (see Pulse report ArtsPay 2018, 2022).
- 8 Support for caregivers - Offering safe, supportive, creative spaces for caregivers is an important aspect of arts with children under three. Time is needed to enable the building of relationships. Caregiver needs, and their wellbeing are important considerations in the work with children under three.
- 9 Access and Inclusion - The majority of respondents’ understanding of access and inclusion touched on reaching into particular geographical places and ensuring practices and the spaces meet the needs of every participant. Less prominent was discussion of discrimination in connection with protected characteristics.
- 10 Skills and knowledge - we identified two different loops or ecologies where knowledge and skill sharing take place. The majority of examples – loop 1 – are cases where skill sharing takes place on a localised level, for example between a creative practitioner and family learning services. Loop 1 is a closed loop - there is no sector-wide dissemination. Therefore, funds of knowledge in loop 1 remain invisible on a strategic level and cannot advocate for the work beyond the existing sector. Loop 2 shows skill sharing that is actively strategic with dissemination events - networks, symposia and conferences - with potential to be far reaching.

3.2 Recommendations

3.2.1 Investment in creative practitioners: nurture and cross-pollinate

The knowledge, skills and experience that are needed to inform policymakers and the wider cultural sector remain locked in a loop that is closed economically and strategically. Our principal recommendation is to find ways to access, invest in and then disseminate the rich fund of knowledge that resides in the sector. This would provide pathways to even deeper thinking and connectivity for the arts workforce which is largely working in a freelance and self-employed capacity where time and thinking space are in short supply.

We recommend:

- Directly investing in creative practitioners, their time and *practice-wisdom* in order to overcome the economic, time pressure and low status barriers that currently prevent and inhibit this fund of knowledge from flourishing and influencing the wider cultural and social sector.

- To keep up with world leading and visionary early years arts practices, significant investment in the training of new generations of creative practitioners will be needed. We recommend the formulation and piloting of a variety of creative teaching programmes that bring together and amplify sector knowledge.
- Developing a national early childhood creative practitioner network for knowledge exchange events so that skills that currently take place within closed, localised loops (loop 1 as discussed above) become connected strategically. This will move the work and the sector forward by enabling cross pollination of funds of different knowledge. Strategic organisations may need to lead this work.

3.2.2 Informed Advocacy

Respondents have shown us (see section 4.2 above) that they experience from others a lack of understanding about their work and the actual knowledge and abilities of young children (Cannella and Viruru, 2004). To truly advocate for this work, we recommend Arts Council England champions and headlines creative practice with young children as both social justice imperative and a way to foreground children's way of knowing which, arguably, lies at the heart of all creative endeavour.

Therefore, this is not only a matter of changing attitudes by convincing policy and the wider cultural sector of the importance of the creative arts for young children, but also a matter of reconceptualising young children as valuable and agentic partners in arts practice as they arguably know more about play, creativity and experimentation than grown-ups.

We recommend:

- A national advocacy programme led by a cohort of experienced early childhood artists/creative practitioners highlighting teaching, sharing and presenting the subtle, sometimes intangible expertise that enables young children's voices to be heard and understood as valuable in society. This should stand in resistance to tokenistic approaches to engaging with young children. It should build on the existing funds of knowledge. This programme could take a variety of forms, responding to the needs and contexts of the sector.
- A sector-wide initiative to inform and educate the early childhood creative workforce to build confidence in using approaches to inclusion, diversity, equity and access as part of the recruitment procedures, practices, policies and ways of working with families. This professional development should be funded for artists/creative practitioners.

3.2.3 Researching practice - an enabler of legacy

There is a plethora of theoretical approaches and the potential for much more theoretical thinking to arise out of the practice-wisdom that resides in the sector. This needs to be envisioned as a national research think tank.

We recommend:

- A pilot study to investigate iterations of 'Arts Start' as a multi-agency/cross-sector approach to early childhood arts and creative practice conducted in several geographical regions including urban, suburban and rural locations.

- Strategic planning to prepare ground for a central research practice hub where creative-research practice with young children and the arts gets thought about, deepened and informed by practice.

4.0 Prologue

4.1 The figure of the young child

How adults think about very young children will influence everything that happens artistically with them. From the ways that: projects are designed; young children's activities are included in programming; funding is allocated; artists are selected and scheduled; and decisions surrounding expectations, outcomes and 'products' from the work are conceived.

Across several different strands of our questionnaire 35 responses explained the ways that practitioners understand and learn from young children. Of this number, 27 responses talked about young children as competent, capable, creative and inspiring for arts practice. The remaining eight responses spoke of children's individuality and working in dialogue with children's ideas and expressions.

Increasingly my approach is to try and learn from children's ways of knowing and their worlding practices - they have much to teach us about situated knowledge and sensory knowing. Early childhood researcher

I see that young children have incredible capacities for connection and creativity and my role is to open the door for that. [...] taking their imaginative and creative input seriously. Artist/creative practitioner

These respondents reveal that by constructing young children as creatively competent, they learn from them. They highlight processes where work is co-created with the child, in the child's time and space, following their interests and shaped by their interactions with the world.

4.2 Postscript as prologue

The final question (Is there anything else you want to tell us?) yielded fascinating comments from 61% of respondents. This large number of responses to a free text question is unusual, providing powerful gleanings which we are foregrounding at this point in the report. Respondents told us how learning from young children has transferred to other areas of their work, impacting their own creations. And yet the fragility of sustaining this practice was also expressed. Respondents feel that the work is not properly understood and remains undervalued by many arts and cultural institutions; it is an add-on rather than centrally important to some organisations' main agenda and mission. What follows is thematically arranged groupings of the key messages from the respondents.

4.2.1 Do not underestimate the impact of working with children aged 0-3 years for creative practice

*As a visual artist who has been practicing for decades **this work with babies is the most stimulating, creative and meaningful experience.** I would like more artists to*

work/ train/ experience this work. Collaborating across art forms with babies, families and artists from other disciplines is the most extraordinary boost to one's practice, a level of experimentation I haven't experienced since my Foundation course 40 years ago! I think you can tell working with babies has been the most extraordinary experience for me and my practice, literally a game changer. Artist/creative practitioner

It is more rewarding than I first perceived. making me think more about a wider audience for my own art work. *Primarily, it has made me never to underestimate what would intrigue or delight children of this age. Every time I work in one of [our] sessions I come away with a real buzz having been able to be part of a joyful and enriching moment in which I have worked with other artists/musicians and we have responded to the individual needs of the little ones. This makes every encounter different.* Artist/creative practitioner

4.2.2 This work is in constant peril

*The state of the EY sector is a challenge - **under valued, under paid, under lots of pressures.** Local authority financial challenges also impact. Work is dependent on grant funding - no guarantee of continuity.* Arts organisation administrator

We have struggled to access sufficient funding to enable us to work in the way that we would like and deliver long term meaningful interventions. Arts organisation administrator and commissioner of EY artwork

4.2.3 The significance of the work is not properly understood

This work is poorly understood within my organisation, and is in constant peril. It only survives thanks to the commitment of a handful of individuals. While the recognition of the early years from Arts Council has been really welcome, work with young children is still seen as peripheral to, or even disconnected from broader institutional missions. [...] the institution where I work has not engaged with the work in a sustainable manner which threatens its longevity and its quality. Artist/creative practitioner (Museum and Galleries)

So incredibly frustrating that the work of arts for early years exists in a silo - not valued (financially) enough by funders given that the early years is the foundation of everything and that it is a world where there is such innate creative opportunity. Founder of an EY arts organisation

5.0 Methodology

We conducted a questionnaire survey comprising 15 questions; including a variety of question types: select from a list of options, Yes/No, and open response. The questionnaire can be found in Appendix A. Our approach to the analysis was predominantly qualitative,

using numerical data to enhance and augment the rich findings from the text data. We used an inductive approach, employing Braun and Clarke's six phases of reflexive thematic analysis (2022, p.35) to arrive at the themes for our interpretation. We then conducted interviews with four of the questionnaire respondents, generating case studies that add richness and real world context to support the questionnaire findings.

5.1 Researcher positionality

Braun and Clarke (2022, p. 38) advise that the researchers' relationship with the data be considered. As two white, female researchers we recognise a complex relationship with these data. We acknowledge our personal commitment to arts practice for very young children and to those that make art with young children, and their caregivers, often in a freelance capacity, and to the organisations that blaze a trail for this work. We felt resonances with the insightful and sensitive contributions from our respondents.²

6.0 Respondents

There were 97 respondents to the questionnaire survey across a range of art forms and from a variety of arts organisations, education, local authority organisations and freelance practitioners. The questionnaire was shared through Arts Council England's networks, Magic Acorns' network, on social media and via direct email invitation for the survey to be shared amongst the recipients' relevant contacts.

Of the 87 respondents who shared their contact details with us, 20 (23%) were known to the researchers, 66 (76%) were unknown. 11 did not leave their contact information. This led the researchers to conclude that the sample was likely to be representative and reliable. Every art form/discipline supported by Arts Council England was represented.

The researchers noticed the depth of curiosity evident in the ways that respondents engaged with the questions, and a dearth of both entrenched positions and claims to having all the answers. This indicates the understanding and openness to uncertainty that characterises ethical, caring creative work with young children and their caregivers.

6.1 What are the respondents' roles?

Respondents could select more than one option to describe their role; **many respondents have multiple roles**. This reflects the reality of the early childhood arts sector which is dependent on freelance, self-employed individuals with a wide range of skills and experience that are put to work in diverse functions and roles (Please see Table in Appendix B for detailed information). Responses are as follows:

- 58% Artist/Creative Practitioner
- 20% Commission early years work

² The Royal College of Music Research Ethics Committee approved the study on 7th February, 2024. Certificate Number: 240101

- 19% Arts organisation administrators
- 6% Library contexts
- 5% Museum contexts
- 4% Early years practitioner.

6.2 Where are respondents working?

Respondents could select more than one option for this question to indicate the context/s in which they worked. **The majority (75%) of respondents work in multiple contexts.** This multiplicity of working contexts also suggests the **self-employed nature** of much of the arts/creative practice with children aged 0-3 years. **Libraries appear to be the notable exception with all but one respondent stating that they only work in libraries.** (Appendix C has more detail)

Sector/s in which you work	Frequency of responses N=97	%
Arts	72	74%
Community arts	58	60%
Education	57	59%
Arts, health & wellbeing (including:n=1 Art Psychotherapist)	50	52%
Learning & Participation (Outreach)	42	43%
Socially engaged arts practice	40	41%
Special education	26	27%
Libraries	7	7%
Social Care	7	7%
Museums	5	5%
Heritage	2	2%

Table 1 Frequency of responses for the sectors in which respondents work

We noted that **‘Arts, health and wellbeing’ was selected by 50 respondents and ‘Socially engaged arts practice’ was selected by 40 respondents.** This significant level of response indicates the diversity of ‘intentions’ that underpin creative work with children under three and their caregivers. Early childhood arts activities often include caregivers accompanying their young children and may take place in a variety of contexts. These places may offer accessible entry points to arts and culture. Underpinning aims for this intergenerational work may include the amelioration and enhancement of a sense of community and mental wellbeing for participants. Arts Council England’s ‘Let’s Create Strategy’ (2020) states that:

we will judge organisations for the way in which [funded organisations] reflect and build a relationship with their communities (ACE, 2020, pg 50).

Aims and purposes of practice can be diverse and not limited to learning outcomes for children. The impact for society, community, and people’s happiness can be at the heart of the purpose of this work. Early childhood arts can be an important access point to arts and culture for societal wellbeing.

6.3 With which arts categories do respondents most align?

The Arts Council England’s art forms/ disciplines were used as a list for respondents to choose their top three items. Of the 91 respondents to this question, 54 (59%) work across multiple art forms and 37 (41%) align themselves with just one art category. The greatest proportion of respondents working in just one art form are:

- Visual art including museums and galleries (13:34, 38%)
- Libraries and literature (5:17, 29%)

Unsurprisingly perhaps for early years, **Combined arts** was the most popular art category selected (n=48), followed by **music** (n=40) and **visual art including museums and galleries** (n=34). (Appendix D has more detailed information)

6.4 The depth and breadth of early childhood arts experience

There is depth to the firsthand experience of creative work with children aged 0-3 years from this sample of respondents; 80% of the sample engage in face-to-face work with children 0-3 years.

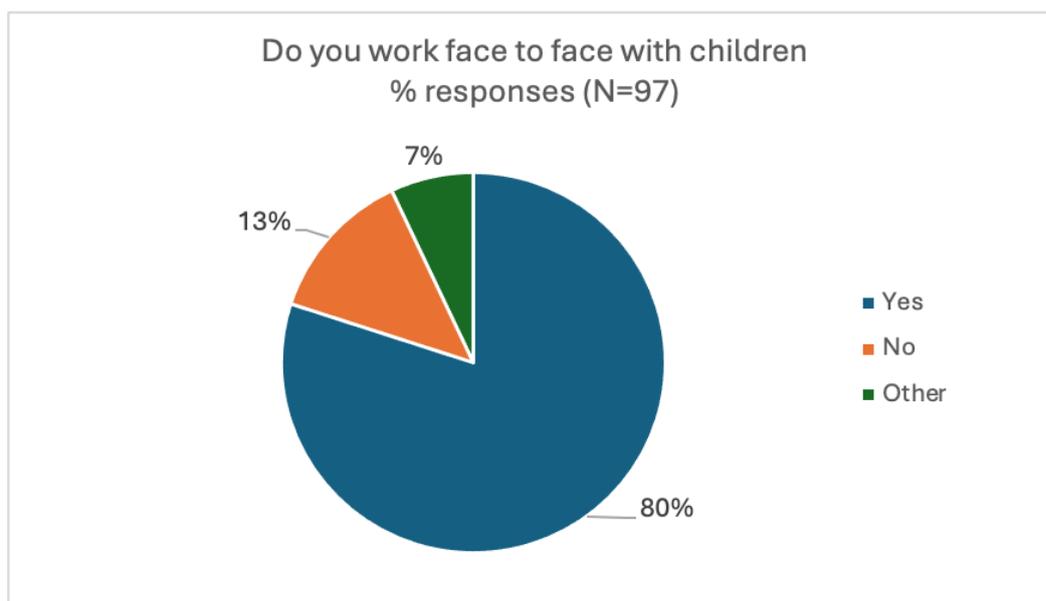


Figure 1 | Percentages of those working face to face with children. Other category respondents remark that they are mentors, supervisors and/or work alongside practitioners.

Nearly 60% of respondents have worked with very young children for ten years or longer which indicates significant depth of both experience and commitment to working with this life-phase.

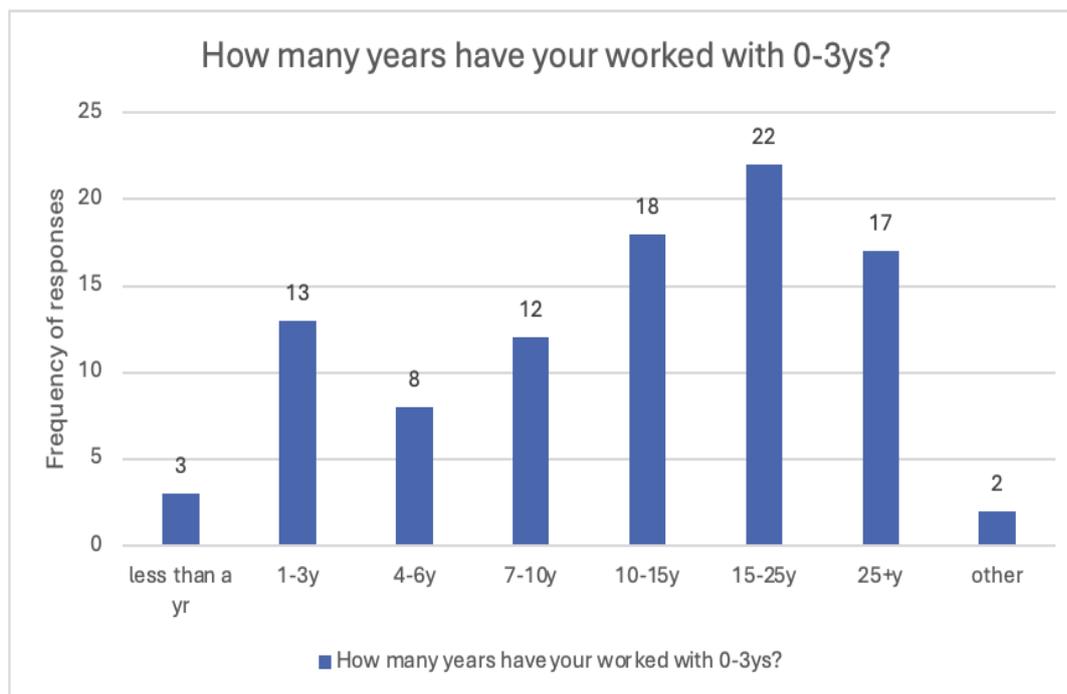


Figure 2 Frequency counts of the number of years respondents have worked with children aged 0-3 years

Combined, these data suggest that there is a **highly experienced creative workforce** out there with strong commitment to this particular area of work as part of their career.

This sample of respondents presents a **rich wellspring of practical wisdom and knowledge** that offers great potential to be harnessed and brought together strategically in order to help shape the argument, from firsthand experience, for creative work with young children under 3. The sector needs **investment and advocacy**, not only as a highly specialised and fulfilling area of artistic practice, but to uphold Arts Council England's imperative to **listen to public voices even when those people do not yet use spoken language**.

“We will therefore ask [funded organisations and practitioners] to demonstrate how they are listening to the voices of the public, including children and young people, artists, and creative practitioners” (Arts Council England, 2020, pg 53)

7.0 Components of early childhood arts practice 'Practice Wisdom'

7.1 Tools and Resources

We asked the (optional) question: *What tools/resources/materials do you rely on in your creative work with young children?*

Two strands were found in the analysis of data. The first referred to tangible items, materials or tools for making-with, and second were less tangible elements that related to the practitioner's skills and practice (See Appendix E for detail)

Tangible Tools and Resources (total 78 respondents)

- **Sound and Music** (51.3% , n=40): Sound, soundmakers, music, songs, instruments, recorded music
- **Visual art materials** (47%, n=37): paint, large rolls of paper, card, crayons, pencils, glue, clay, chalk, masking tape
- **Storytelling, books** (27%, n=21)
- **The word 'sensory'** (19%, n=15) respondents in connection with materials, stories, play, arts, and as a tool, hinting at the multi-modal nature of early childhood creative practice.

Intangible tools and resources

In addition to these tangible tools and resources 11 arts/creative practitioners referred to elements of themselves, or other less tangible aspects as the tools /resources:

"My body, my sensitivity and awareness, my empathy..."

"Space, time and attention, quality resources, intelligent materials."

Other intangible qualities noted are: instincts, spontaneity, knowledge of Makaton sign language. Personal resources such as: having a degree and owning a car, were noted by individuals as important for their work.

In the next section are findings related to the less obvious aspects of practice - the beliefs and values that underpin the kinds of activities and experiences that are created for and with children under three.

7.2 Theories approaches and methods

Respondents were asked to *tell us about any theories, approaches or methods that inform their way of working with children aged 0-3years*. We found a wealth of applied knowledge across visual and temporal art forms. Many theories, theorists and approaches have been

creativity experts, and entering their play sphere with an attitude of openness to the possible.

8.0 The ways that creative practitioners listen to and understand young children's ways of knowing the world.

One of the remits for this study was to foreground the child's existing creative competency and valid ways of knowing the world in order for Arts Council England to advocate more strongly for early childhood arts with both policymakers and the cultural sector.

We asked: *How do you work with, respond and listen to the way in which children aged 0-3 years know, experience and understand the world? and What are the challenges?*

Our iterative analysis revealed the following themes:

8.1 Multi-modal listening

The majority of respondents (61%, 59) told us that listening to young children is embodied and multi-modal, requiring many senses and sensitivities to be employed as part of this practice. This is not passive listening but an active, present and ready listening that is attuned and responsive.

*You have to **bring your whole-self to it**. You must be ready. Still. Calm. But not passive. You have to be **fully present**. It is always best when you find ways of receiving as well as listening. Of gently extending or augmenting what you receive. It is a conversation or shared creative act. Invite, not invade. You must be ready to change and respond in ways that support the shifts in the child. You must learn to read these shifts. To notice and find out how the child is communicating. This can take **time**. But it always takes your full attention. Artist/creative practitioner*

The following respondent explains the sensitive process of attuning their senses in order to listen to young children:

*I **hear** their vocalisation and breath patterns, I **see** them withdraw or reach out, I **follow** their curiosity and energetic patterns, I **watch** their interaction with primary carers and **gauge** how they may be entering the room, I **approach** gently and **read** their body language as I **make or take an offer**. Artist/Creative practitioner*

Another respondent explains *...you can listen to them via the way they move, the marks they make, their patterns, the sounds they make.* Founder of an EY arts organisation

This multi-layered form of listening is acquired through spending time with young children, watching and learning with them. **Observation** was mentioned by 18 respondents, it is integral to the creative process.

By listening, observing, documenting and then responding creatively to their multi-modal reactions Artist/creative practitioner

These itemised elements of practice are facets of empathetic attention skills and knowledge that practitioners employ in their 'listening to children'.

8.2 Following the child's lead

In addition to multimodal listening, of the 37%, (36) who did not use the term 'multi-modal' in their responses, 15 respondents spoke about how their practice focused on taking the lead from children:

e.g.,[...] we also use a child centred approach to supporting artists to create work by, with and for young children.

With the focus of practice being on what the child is interested in during the session the facilitation has to be open-ended, improvised and organic; taking the lead from the child is more likely to lead to generative processes of co-creation rather than a predetermined, adult-devised outcome.

8.3 It takes time to listen to young children

We have heard from respondents that listening to children aged 0-3 years requires particular, complex ways of listening and this, 22 respondents told us, takes **time**.

*ensuring you don't make assumptions through your own preconceptions, also need to create a safe space where children feel they can express themselves, **requires time and investment to listen properly.*** EY arts organisation administrator/Commissioner of EY arts

Work with children under three is an area of creative practice that is not well understood in terms of what is needed to maintain practice that is open-ended, curious and emergent:

Doing less. Observing is essential. It is very challenging in practice, when you sometimes feel you have to be 'doing something' or 'making music'. Artist/creative practitioner

The challenge is not in listening to 0-3yrs, but it is in the lack of resources to pay artists to be able to reflect upon what they have noticed and act upon it. EY arts organisation administrator

In advocating for early childhood arts to policymakers and the cultural sector, in addition to the ways that adults listen to young children, the whole idea of time and space needed for this work was raised by respondents across many questions as important factors to consider. As Belfiore (2021) elaborates, it is socially engaged arts practitioners who are faced with the personal and psychological impact of the work they do with young children and families. They also have to grapple with the ethical dilemmas of the short term funded work where the funding (or lack of it) rather than the project relationships dictate timescales. This can result in deep exhaustion and compassion fatigue.

9.0 What are the challenges in listening to children 0-3 years old?

9.1 It takes more time to listen when children are pre-verbal.

When identifying challenges, children's lack of words or verbal expression came up a significant number of times (n=30).

The challenge lies with the adult to ensure that they observe, respond and learn from very young children which requires a very different approach to the way that we might work with older children and adults. Commissioner of EY art work

These problems seemed to be most evident with creative practitioners who were time-limited in their work.

Understanding what they are trying to communicate - can be hard to 'tune in' in an hour session. Arts organisation administrator

Slowing down sufficiently to understand non-verbal as well as pre-verbal communication. Artist/creative practitioner

Making and creating with children under three asks for gentle, slow pedagogy (Clark, 2023), for sensitivity and sophisticated listening to children which needs spaciousness for understanding and response.

9.2 Challenge of external expectations

Respondents told us that there are external dimensions that can affect and impact their early childhood arts practice. These are:

1.) **Society/Time** - pressure is felt by expectations of wider 'society' that expects outcomes delivered quickly: a cause and effect, evidence-based, or input-output approach to practice. This is the antithesis of an in-the-moment, process-led arts practice that has been described by respondents. **Time** was again mentioned by 24 respondents in answer to this question.

The current pressures in society in terms of taking the time needed to really listen and be able to respond. The current pressured climate can make slower pedagogy required to do real listening more challenging and potentially harder to justify to outcomes-driven funders. Artist founder of an arts organisation

2.) **The Setting** - where artists/creative practitioners work alongside educators there can be disjunctions in expectations. As a 'bought-in' service creative practitioners may feel that they must be obviously 'doing' with the children. The following response points to a strategic need for collaborations with shared aims and purposes that everyone knows and understands. 16 respondents mentioned either 'setting'(n=6)'practitioner' (n=6) or 'staff'(n=4).

Worrying about what the setting staff/parents think about the fact that you don't seem to be doing anything as an artist. Artist/creative practitioner

Sometimes the environment is too hectic, and the groups need to be small enough to hold them all. Artist/creative Practitioner

If I don't have enough support of other practitioners in the space it can be very hard. Artist/creative practitioner

The prevailing culture of work with young children is developmental, looking for evidence for adult-selected outcomes. Artistic/creative practice brings an alternative, counter-cultural offer - or *pedagogy of improvisation* (Lines 2018,pg 53) for young children and their caregivers but it can be challenging to established perceptions and attitudes.

3.) **Parents/Carers** - 10 respondents talked about parents and carers. Working in early childhood inevitably brings adult caregivers, both professional and familial, into the arts/creative space. Working with the dynamic, and sometimes complex relationships that ensue during group activities with adults and young children present, can add an extra dimension to the skills and expertise needed by the artists/creative practitioners. Adult expectations may not necessarily be aligned to what might be the best practice for the young children.

*Including caregivers is beneficial and supports engagement but their **presence in the activity is integral** to success. This can be a challenge, if they are distracted or*

struggling to connect to the activity/their child, the children can struggle to engage.
Artist/creative practitioner

The biggest challenge is supporting their adult carers to step back and allow children to explore. Artist/creative practitioner

10.0 Arts Council England 4 strategic themes

The following four questions refer to Arts Council England's focus areas: Cross-sector partnerships, Support for caregivers, Access and inclusion and Sharing of skills and professional development

10.1 Cross-sector partnerships

At the height of the Sure Start Children's Centre programme in England (1998-2008) partnership working with inter-disciplinary communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) was the integrated approach to early childhood education and care.

"Effective partnerships between social services, education and health professionals, voluntary and private providers, and people running children's centres, are an essential feature of the programme." (National Audit Office, 2006)

At that time, it was acknowledged that partnership working was multi-dimensional, complex, bringing together people with differing views and approaches to practice (Gasper, 2010). Yet the challenges presented by diverse views and motivations were overcome to some extent by the central focus for the partnership-working, namely, **the best interests of the child and their family** (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; 1994).

It would seem that the '**Arts Start**' notion posited by Serota (2024) would have been well suited to this integrated, cross sector partnership-working model.

As we analysed the data from this question it became clear that the deeply integrated communities of practice described above were less evident in EY creative practice now than they might have been a decade ago.

Fifteen of the respondents to the question: *Please tell us about any cross-sector partnerships that you (or your organisation) are involved with that support creative work with children aged 0-3 years* told us they had **no partnership working**:

"There aren't any at the moment, there is very little available outside of my own practice for such young children." Early years practitioner

It was difficult to garner detail about the nature of the partnerships with which many of the respondents are engaged from their responses to this question. A proportion of respondents offered a list of cross-sector partners that they worked with, or had worked

with in the past (n=11) giving no further information about the ways the partnerships supported creative work with young children.

Terms such as: 'working with' (30 times) and 'deliver' (16 times) occurred numerous times in responses - suggestive perhaps of less embedded, co-designed-partnership models.

We work with local libraries, which often signpost to groups/areas that need the most provision/support [...] Arts organisation administrator

Our analysis pointed to a disparity in terms of participating in cross-sector partnerships between those creative practitioners that work on behalf of, or through a local authority (or similar) organisation such as a museum or library and independent freelance artist practitioners or smaller arts organisations which is discussed in the section below.

10.1.1 Ease of access to local authority partners

Our analysis of the 82 responses to this question suggests that *organisations* are more involved, in more diverse cross-sector partnerships, than individual freelance creative practitioners. To assess this we cross referenced gov.uk and/or ac.uk³ email addresses (n=21) (of those respondents who gave their contact information) with the responses to this question. It became clear that their responses showed a range of collaborations with arts sector partners and those external to the early childhood arts sector.

*We work with **visual arts practitioners, music teachers, theatre companies** to provide cultural experiences to early years children and their families to enhance our library offer.* Librarian

Those who work in Local Authority organisations have access to Local Authority connections and others working in similar organisations:

*I work with **the local authority** through Child & Family Centres, local EY settings, other artists & museums, voluntary sector organisations, universities (training future practitioners)* Museum Artist/creative practitioner

*We invite musicians and artists into our school to work with the children. **The local council have some good connections** and there are **some we have formed over the years** through our own practice.* EY practitioner

Many small arts organisations and freelance artists may not have the capacity to access a diverse range of potential local authority partners without having to broker these relationships and build trust. As one respondent with no cross-sector partnerships told us: *None. We are an independent bootstrapped business of musical practitioners.* Building connections and relationships can take time and is costly for freelance practitioners who are often paid solely to deliver activity. The Pulse Report (2018; 2022) highlights how

³ Some museums are connected to academic institutions and have ac.uk email addresses.

freelance artists and small arts organisations are profoundly underpaid. Therefore, some material support will likely be needed to propagate cross sector partnerships.

10.1.2 Working with Education and Care (incl. Children's Centres, Family Hubs, Local authorities)

Working with early childhood education and care was mentioned by 45 (55%) respondents. Amongst mostly a list given by respondents that included education in the response, there were nine respondents who evidenced their close joint working with individual education and care settings:

I also work in 2 nursery settings delivering more focused long term music based sessions for identified children with additional needs. Artist/Creative practitioner

An early childhood researcher respondent tells us that:

There is a risk that it [arts] can become recruited instrumentally to shore up a "school readiness" agenda that many Local Authorities are being required to speak to. In addition, they perceive that: Cross-sector collaboration between arts and early years care and education is particularly pressing at this moment in time.

Our analysis did not show many strategic partnerships across local authorities with arts organisations. However, the Founder of an EY arts organisation (based in a city - suburban and rural contexts may present different joint-working challenges) offers one strong, example:

*We are **leading on a 15 school project** supporting schools in their development of creative approaches to EY music making **in partnership with a local authority**. We **lead EY music training across two other local authorities in London**. We work in **partnership with Local authorities as match funders** in our youth music funded music making programme. We are **funded by early help** to deliver a SEND based EY families programme around environments and sensory play and music. We are leading on the early years and SEND strand of a ACE funded place based partnership **as part of the steering group of our local LCEP**. We have been **commissioned to make early years work by the local authority we are based in**. [...] We work with **nurseries, childminders, children's centres, and schools** on a wide range of early years projects. We have **worked with libraries** and will host an EY project in libraries later this year. We have also delivered a **project in the homes of families with children 0-2** with an early SEND life limiting diagnosis. We **work with local music hubs, and council teams across at least four local authorities in London**. We also **work with virtual schools**.*

10.1.3 Participating in Networks

It could be argued that those employed by local authority organisations are already situated within a network of connections without perhaps acknowledging or realising it. In addition,

15 respondents had no partnerships currently. There were several responses (6) from smaller arts organisations who mentioned the value of being part of **networks**:

We are working with [name] Early Years Network to deliver work directly in settings.
Commissioner of EY work for arts organisation

My organisation has strong connections with [University name] Research department, and [name org] and together we have been developing an Early Years Network connecting artists, practitioners and researchers. EY Artist/Creative practitioner for arts organisation

National Networks

Our interpretation of these data suggests that increasing connectivity across the sector would enable greater skill and knowledge sharing; potentially give rise to increased cross-sector partnerships. The establishment of ongoing national networks for the freelance artist workforce to connect and join up with organisation-based creative practitioners could be of value to support more equitable access to partnership working.

10.2 Support for caregivers.

Fourteen respondents did not answer the question: *Please tell us about how you support caregivers.*

Themes arising from the analysis of the remaining 83 participants showed that offering **support (or supportive environment)** for caregivers was important for 28 respondents as was providing **space** for creative expression (26). Perhaps the two are inextricably linked. **Time** (13) came through as an important component to the creation of a supportive environment where caregiver **relationships** (11) can be built and there is an opportunity to **share** (13) experiences together with their child/ren and with other adults. Respondents referred to **modelling** (10) ways of playing that, for some respondents, have caregiver **wellbeing** (10) as one of the main foci. It is important too that the spaces are **safe** (10) for caregivers which are dependent on thinking about caregivers' **needs** (8) as much as the needs of their children (See Appendix G for detailed analysis).

What has come through the data is that a strong element of the work with young children concerns working with adults too, this is part of making art together. Although *making-with* is the primary focus and the expertise of practitioners, clearly many have honed other skills and expertise, for example in group work, active listening and attunement. They have also acquired subtle knowledge and skills of how to create safe spaces for building relationships and engendering a sense of community.

10.3 Access and Inclusion

We asked: *Please tell us about how you are successful in reaching and impacting children who may experience barriers to engagement.* The 85 respondents' answers indicate their understanding of these terms. Most frequently mentioned (by 30 respondents) regards the

inclusion of children with special educational needs. Very young children may not have any kind of diagnosis yet so it is very common for all children to access arts and creative activities. It is therefore understandable that inclusion and access for all children is a priority for respondents. Another access and inclusion issue mentioned by 29 respondents is regarding work with **participants living in specific areas/low income (eg. areas of high deprivation)**. 17 respondents explain that reaching and impacting children and families is **dependent on partnerships**.

eg., ...[this] requires a strong partnership approach, working with relevant groups and agencies who our 'target audience' families have trusted relationships with[...]
National organisation.

Fourteen respondents speak of adopting an **'everybody welcome' approach**:

Providing space that is open-ended - not outcome based - celebrating what children can do - not focussing on what they can't do - celebrating parents, creating a culture where families look out for each other. Artist/creative practitioner; Arts organisation administrator; Commissioner of EY arts work

Eleven mention **Offering of safe, trusted spaces** as important in overcoming barriers of access.

In total there are 118 references made by respondents to the themes that relate to facilitating access for those with additional needs and the provision of spaces where everyone is welcome and feels safe (see Appendix H for detail).

However, there is a significant low level of comments that address diversity, discrimination, and protected characteristics directly. Although 4 respondents address participants' possible language barriers and the need to produce written word in different languages, there are just two cases that comment on the need:

*to ensure our team of artists reflect **the diversity of our communities** to effectively engage & work with babies, young children & their families.* Commissioner of arts work for health, social care, community contexts; Lead artist

Just one respondent speaks of a variety of protected characteristics that may be the source of discrimination for families and young children:

*We have a commitment to valuing and respecting the diversity of individuals, families and communities to ensure that no child or family is **discriminated against in terms of protected characteristics**, age, disability, gender, race, religion or beliefs.*
University professor

These findings lead us to conclude that while there is a clear commitment to access and inclusion there appears to be a professional development need for the early childhood arts sector to find ways to feel confident and capable in talking about protected characteristics, racism, threads of colonialism, discrimination, unconscious biases, and allyship.

10.4 Skills and Professional Development

23 respondents did not answer the question: *Please give us any examples of knowledge sharing around the value of creativity with babies, young children and their families between your arts practice and non-arts organisations.* Possibly because they felt they had already answered it in the question about partnership working. **This would suggest that, as the sector understands it, there is a lot of overlap between skill sharing and partnership working.** (See appendix I)

Two Loops of skills and knowledge sharing

We identified two loops - or ecologies pertaining to skill sharing:

Loop 1 - Comprises experienced artists delivering training and CPD with their local early years educators, children's services and local authorities. This suggests a localised skill sharing - **a closed loop** - rather than a sector-wide dissemination pathway, These were the majority of examples given (32). **These skills remain invisible on a strategic level.**

Loop 1 cannot advocate for the work beyond its localised ecology. Strategic investment is needed so that the experienced practice can move the work forward, connect and cross pollinate funds of knowledge.

Loop 2 - Comprises conferences and symposia arranged by organisations including publications and academic outputs. These are examples and models of regional, national and/or international skill and knowledge sharing for those who are resourced to contribute and /or attend. They are actively strategic and have potential to be far reaching. Nine respondents told us about written publications and research as a way of sharing their skills and knowledge. 12 respondents spoke about symposia, festivals and networking as a means of both sharing and finding skills and knowledge.

11.0 Case Studies

The aim of the case study research was to augment the findings from the questionnaire survey with rich accounts from freelance Artists/Creative practitioners. Selection criteria were discussed with Arts Council England's Children, Young People and Learning team to be exemplars of the freelance workforce. The research team was interested in the impact of Develop Your Creative Practice (DYCP) grants for freelance artists. The interview schedule is attached in Appendix J.

Through four case studies we have been able to gather detail of the lived experience of freelance artists working with children under three. Although each respondent is unique in their experience and pathway to working with the youngest children, the case studies have uncovered similar issues encountered in working in this field of practice.

Namely:

- The work is neither respected, understood, nor valued for the subtle, nuanced and complex range of skills, knowledge and understanding required to do the work at the highest level. It remains a low paid, low status artistic practice.
- High quality art for young children is high cost. It requires *at least* two artists in the space working with a small number (6-8) of under-threes and their parents. This means it is not attractive economically for performance venues. Community contexts are ideal spaces, often dependent on funding to enable everyone to attend.
- Creative practice with young children is improvisatory, flexible and in-the-moment. It requires attention and attunement to non-verbal language, and this takes time and hours of experience to develop.
- The practice gives permission to play to caregivers.
- The practice requires Trust.
- Networks and partnerships enable connections with different audiences that might not otherwise encounter arts practice.
- Skills and knowledge sharing opportunities are limited; freelancers have lots to share but the nature of the career and its low paid status limits opportunities to share expertise. This is an area for critical investment.

11.1 Case Study – Emma

Emma has 25-years' experience in the field of puppetry and play with under-fives and a large proportion of her work is aimed at the under-three age group.

Emma's shows are designed to facilitate imagination and creativity, often involving interactive and sensory elements. She is committed to reaching diverse audiences and working in partnership projects but it is not always straightforward because the work is not valued.

Emma told us about the importance of play as integral to her creative practice and the challenge of playful work looking chaotic and unruly if you have not had experience of creative work with very young children.

The creative process of working with under fives feeds me as much as I do them. I know they're going to come up with 10,000 times better ideas than I do. But I'll be really flexible and interactive on what happens. I'll manage it so that it's all interwoven in a really carefully made structure.

Emma's conception of and respect for young children is fundamental to her approach:

[artists] need to be tapping into [children] as individuals. And here's the biggest thing: you need to respect them as human beings. You just need to be in the moment with them, responding to them and who they are.

Advocating for Early Years Practices

Emma speaks of the importance of working with partners such as nursery practitioners, librarians, and teachers. She suggests that training these practitioners and providing them with resources could lead to more frequent and higher quality arts activities with children in settings.

She tells us of the need for support from organisations like Arts Council England to ensure that creative practices are respected and implemented effectively:

No one gives proper prep time. No one respects what you're doing which is a bit depressing. Not no one, that sounds terrible doesn't it?...but the people in charge of the purse strings, because we're not a big earner because you can't ram 80 babies in there and have a quality experience.

Pay and conditions for quality creative shenanigans

It's all right to pay a bit more to give the quality to show people this is what proper shenanigans should look like – the carefully thought-through shenanigans and the creative shenanigans. It's our job as a theatre practitioner to provide top quality shenanigans. I do want people to love the early years, and right now it's laughable what I earn, and I hope that can be addressed in some way.

Emma emphasises that it is the amount of pay linked to the amount of effort and expense that goes into early years work that is not reflected in current pay rates. The nature of the work requires extensive preparation and resources. This led to Emma talking about not having enough time to share her practice. Speaking about her role as an associate artist with partner organisations, she notes that she is not on priority lists and would need to submit a proposal to be considered.

Emma is a highly experienced neurodivergent artist who finds the funding hoop- jumping and grant application processes are far removed from her creative practice and highly specialised skill set.

Grants, Funding, and Early Childhood Arts

Emma calls for proper funding and research to understand what is relevant for practitioners, as well as different ways to deliver information. She believes networking and learning from others are important but notes the pressure of time. She tells of the challenges of working with underfunded nursery settings and their difficulties of staff retention.

Talking about a previous DYCP that she had been awarded she says:

It gave me permission. Here's 10 grand, go and make this thing - and I made it.

Thinking about submitting another application for DYCP funding she adds:

*I don't do a thing unless I'm funded to do a thing because I can't. I need some dinner! It's so hard to have time to put the bid in, as well as doing the delivery. **I need the space to fail.***

11.2 Case Study - Natalie

From Actress to Early Childhood Artist

Natalie tells us about her journey from acting to becoming a multidisciplinary actress with babies and very young children. Working with babies has deeply transformed her artistic practice:

...what I found really fascinating is how the work with the babies has absolutely shifted the way I feel about acting and my relationship with that kind of work. It's really opened it up completely, and it's definitely made me a better artist, better...more open, more alive. It's brought back the play that I had lost.

She shares insights of the complexity of her work, emphasising the cultural shift needed to recognise the level of skills required to make beautiful work for this highly discerning audience. She speaks of the challenges involved, as well as the importance of developing trust between parents, artists and children often in very short spaces of time.

Natalie joined an early childhood arts organisation as a freelance artist with little experience of working with young children. She notes the amount of quality mentorship and leadership offered by the lead artists:

We had very good leadership with very good ideas. But we were given a lot of space to play.

‘Artists and babies have similar needs’ : a held space in order to play

And that's the funny thing a lot of people in the arts still have a very single-minded idea of what work for babies is. It's one of those things that's a cultural shift [...] So yes, I share with people. But it's hard to explain what the work is.

Speaking about people's lack of understanding about the work Natalie says:

It isn't cute. It's vital. It's like, really, really fundamental.

We're saying, this isn't like a rhyme time. This isn't a mum and baby group. This is a piece of art and a piece of play where we're going to focus on the babies.

I think, because our understanding of children is noisy, chaotic, we have so many prejudices against what a baby is. So there's something about really excellent art. Everybody's shoulders drop, and that is in a room full of tiny, noisy, smelly, hectic babies - I just think you can really change people's minds about what a baby is, and what a baby needs, and what a baby brings to the table.

People even ask: **“Do you get Paid for this?”**

Co-creative practice - that is resource heavy

Natalie explains that working in a responsive, nuanced and highly skilled way requires proper resourcing to give the time and space it deserves. For example, she has found that it takes three artists working and playing with a group of 10 babies to optimise the potential for close up, intimate encounters while also having a sense of the whole session and what it needs. Natalie explains the value of having supported space to play and fail.

Explaining about the benefits of her DYCP grant Natalie says:

*It is a really, truly great way of giving an artist **direction but freedom**. So I have put together this plan that has a lot of excellent parts to it. One of the best parts of it is the mentorship stuff.*

Natalie tells us how the DYCP gives her stability to play:

Which actually is a very good metaphor for what a session is, and what I hope any art that I make for babies is like. It's a moment of stability. We hold the space, so that you can play.

She comments that the process of applying for any grant costs a freelancer many unpaid hours. She also suggests that all the early childhood artists with a DYCP might be connected to share and discuss.

11.3 Case Study - Charly

Charly is a musician and workshop leader who works about 25% of her time with early childhood arts.

I'm learning that actually, out of all the different things that it's probably one of the things I'm most passionate about.

Evolving early childhood arts practice

She expresses her interest in finding diverse ways to lead musical activities that cater to all children, inspired by her experiences as a parent. She has been influenced by an EY arts organisation with whom she has connected and learned with. She now leads regular sessions with a mix of play and adult-led activities. She discusses the importance of creating performances for young children that foster bonding moments and strong memories.

I'm really interested as a performer to find ways to bend and flex musically, the structure of what I'm doing around how the children are presenting different ideas and how they are in the space.

Charly highlights the joy of mirroring children's ideas and the sense of connection it brings, as well as the present moment feeling that improvising and playing with a group of people in a space provides.

Children are just so, you know, we can learn so much from them in that way, they are so free. It makes me feel a lot more free, and it just makes me really happy.

Charly is at the point where her creative practice with young children is evolving and maturing:

I think, when I started doing child led work, I was really worried about leading moments. But actually, it's like trying to find the silence and make people feel a bit held.

She is learning that the work is multi-layered:

I realize that a lot of it is welcoming the adults in, especially with the nought to two's. It's about making them feel comfortable, talking to them and settling them in; looking after that whole group. [...] You're facilitating a space and that makes everybody feel really held.

The practice poses difficulties with funding:

Ultimately, you want smaller numbers which poses difficulties with funding and trying to explain that to people. So they understand. That's quite a challenge.

The work is demanding in terms of time, it can be exhausting:

It's tiring, you know. For the show that we've made [Name] is only half an hour, but we've actually added a whole hour of free play after it because you're holding a space. So when we're drawing up tour schedules, we can't do 5 days a week of this. Maximum 4, which is only 8 shows. So it's that kind of thing, I think is quite hard.

Unseen time of life- the work not being recognised and valued

It's that unseen time of life, with parents just getting on with it and raising their children. And you become part of that.

[there is an assumption that] Before school age, it's just mucking around. They're [children] not people yet. And you're entertaining them, filling in the hours.

Charly discusses her partnerships with an arts organisation, libraries and a large arts venue - highlighting the challenges of working in partnership, **such as unclear expectations and communication issues**. There are positive aspects to partnerships working such as being given space in kind and promotion of the shows on partners' websites and to their contacts. However, hopes of working with staff at partner organisations such as library staff, proved unsuccessful in reality as there was no funding available for the staff to attend the professional development sessions.

DYCP grant - Get a load of stuff, get a load of children and see how they play with it:

Charly told us that her DYCP grant has enabled a collaborative process with young children that has deeply informed her creative practice. The grant itself has motivating power:

There's something when someone gives you some money to do something. You have to do it. You know, it's that simple. That's what's magical about it. I've got to sit down and do it now, because someone's validated it with some money before it happens.

So, get a load of stuff, get a load of children. see how they play with it, and get that to inform what you make as an artist. Start with them and how they react to things. I think that should be at the heart of an R&D process.

11.4 Case Study - Maddie

I think maybe children encourage me to slow down and think

Maddie is an improvisatory artist, working across art forms including music, dance, fine art and clowning. At the moment all of their work is with very young children. They shared their journey from being an aspiring group leader to realising that, rather than leading children, they could learn from them.

It wasn't leading children that I wanted to do. It was listening to children and spending time with them

Maddie emphasises the freedom and creativity that children bring, and how they encourage us to slow down and think differently. This requires being present and “**valuing what is learned by artists from children's unstructured play**”. Maddie described methods of finding and exploring games, of being receptive and responsive at the same time as maintaining rapport with other artists and adults in the room.

They recognised the importance of “*getting on the floor*” and engaging with children, as well as being able to read the full context of a child's, or a group's situation.

Sometimes I feel with adults, there's quite a pressure to talk and to verbalize a lot [...] When I'm hanging out with children, it's less about making logical sense in the head space, and more about being in the body ... free flow between thinking and doing, and being [...] a network web-feeling of threads across the space. [...] You deep dive into being really receptive and really responsive for a period of time

DYCP

Speaking about their DYCP, Maddie emphasised the value of being given a grant without predetermined outcomes; that the permission and trust that comes with the grant is highly generative, enabling artists to try and fail and to experiment. They highlighted the value of working in large chunks of time rather than being hurried through a typical freelance “jigsaw

week” , and how this in turn supports creating a held and slowed space for children’s expression to flourish.

If we were rushed and we had to go in, deliver a session and rush out again to do different things. We wouldn't have that in-between time [...] Sometimes you can feel something's really special without really knowing why. And if you [have time to] explore it together, then you can work it out

Maddie also spoke about how their DYCP project has enabled them to focus on the skills of developing creative rapport - an “unspoken sense” - with another artist at the same time as attuning to children and parents.

We can riff with each other now, we haven't got to be like, what should we do next, we just sort of know

‘Holding Organisations’

Highlighting the bonding experience of working with other artists in a process of creative inquiry, which has led to lasting relationships and mutual influence on practice, Maddie calls for more cross-disciplinary arts mixing, pushing boundaries and a need for funding, space, and time. They spoke of the value of residencies, play days, and network meetings in shaping their career and future endeavours. They emphasise the significance of networks and connections, and relationships with ‘*holding organisations*’ - arts organisations and collectives with a specific early childhood focus and their shared communities of creative practice - that have helped articulate what is currently a niche practice. They speak about the role of critical friends, and *holding organisations* as crucial for their work as this meets the need for frequent, diverse experiences to foster growth and understanding. These relationships with like-minded artists have instilled the value of engaging in post-performance conversations and reflective practices such as reviewing recordings.

Challenges

Maddie has been working on a collaborative project with another artist for children under two and their families. This project has sprung from a DYCP grant. Project partners include arts organisations, libraries and family hubs who have helped research, develop, broker and promote this work.

They told us about the problems of explaining their approach to partners and the difficulties of communicating their work in a concise and non-alienating manner whilst also conveying the magic. *“it is much easier to show the work in action than to describe it”*. Committed to working in diverse community contexts, Maddie notes

I think parents have got so much pressure on them, and there's so many expectations

placed on them. And it's ironic, really, because what we're trying to do is alleviate that sense of pressure and expectation in the spaces we create. But by offering something called an 'art event' can automatically alienate some people.

This makes applying for funding and justifying the need for smaller numbers of children to potential community partners very time consuming. There is a reliance on a very small pool of potential partners who understand the work. The onus is put on the artist to undertake this time consuming communication and advocacy work and also to understand the power structures and infrastructures of community organisations. Larger arts organisations - or holding organisations - can help shoulder some of this work and also help with more strategic skill sharing as well as articulation and advocacy.

Noticing and supporting the existing community

Maddie emphasises the importance of supporting new members into these collaborative environments; of having a supportive family-like environment for artists to create high-quality work.

They suggest Arts Council England invest in early childhood arts by directly funding artists and by supporting connections between artists and networks . They urge ACE to notice and support the *holding companies* that are already alive or forming and to facilitate these connections *“through funding / acknowledgement / invitation to step up.”*

I wouldn't want to suggest the Arts Council swoop in over the heads of communities of practice and just 'token gesturely' invent a holding organisation who know nothing of the practitioners working in the field. More that they could recognise the need for those organisations, better articulate what role they play, and offer specific funding or guidance so these organisational structures can flourish. I think that would strengthen routes into this work and for artists and make working in the field more sustainable and higher quality.

12.0 Final words

Many of us may recall how in our childhood the world seemed like an enchanted place, not because anything extraordinary or spectacular happened, not because we felt we were very powerful and could make things happen at will, but because we could feel the pulse of life and mystery of being in every thing and every being that surrounded us.

(Bai 2009, pg 141).

In this beautiful quote, Heesoon Bai conjures the world of early childhood to remind us of what we may have forgotten. Artists across time have recognised the relationship between early childhood ways of knowing and their adult creativity. Our respondents have provided rich examples of their understanding of young children’s improvisatory competence and its benefits to their creative process. And yet the younger a child is the less their ways of knowing are acknowledged and valued. By association this is also true of those creatives who work with young children. What we have termed the *practice-wisdom* of early childhood arts practice remains a fund of neglected knowledge that is not enabled to permeate the wider cultural sector, policy making - and society.

The recommendations found in this report don't pull any punches and we realise the extent of their ambition. If we want to be a world-leading early childhood arts sector, we can have higher expectations for what is possible when artists, young children, parents, carers and educators create together. Raising the status has the potential to generate yet-to-be-imagined change for unknown futures for both practice and young children. We believe that the skills and knowledge already reside in this sector and can radically transform the way we understand creative processes. And we do this by acknowledging the powerful role that childhood understanding has on art making.

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14.0 Appendices

14.1 Appendix A

Young Children's Creativity Research

This research is being conducted by Magic Acorns on behalf of Arts Council England to help understand and identify examples of arts practices that listen to the voices of very young children from birth to three.

The questionnaire is specifically asking about your work with children aged birth to three years old and is relevant to England only.

Arts Council England is the national development agency for creativity and culture. ACE has set out their strategic vision in [Let's Create](#) that by 2030 they want England to be a country where the creativity of each of us is valued and given the chance to flourish, from birth and throughout our entire lives.

There are 16 questions in this questionnaire which could take between 10-30 minutes to complete, depending on how much time you need to think about your responses to the questions. Some key information about the questionnaire:

You will not be identified through the reporting of the findings. The information you provide will be:

- a.) Stored on a password protected drive, b.) Accessed only by the research team, c.) Destroyed after five years.

Please know that there are no right or wrong answers.

The research is interested in you and your organisation, everything you say matters.

[Please note that any identifying information about you or your participants will be redacted to preserve anonymity]

Please be honest in your responses.

Should you have any questions about your participation in this study please contact: Dr Jessica Pitt jessica@magicacorns.co.uk

*** Indicates required question**

What will happen to the information I provide?

The final report: will be used by Arts Council England, available in the public domain for dissemination and in their advocacy role for young children's arts and creativity.

Other publications:

Academic papers and conference presentations may be published that may use and cite this data.

(Please note not all dissemination opportunities can be accurately anticipated)

Because your responses are made anonymously it will not be possible for * you to withdraw your consent to participate in the questionnaire once you have submitted your responses. PLEASE CONFIRM YOUR PARTICIPATION BY TICKING THE BOX BELOW.

I opt in to the research

Background information

It will help us to ensure a representative sample of participants for the second phase of the research (case study research) if you could tell us about yourself.

2. Which of the following options best describes you? * Please select the option that

describes your role

Check all that apply.

I am an artist /creative practitioner

I am an arts organisation administrator

I commission Early Years arts work for an arts organisation

I am a health practitioner

I am a social care practitioner

I commission Early Years arts work for health contexts

I commission Early Years arts work for social care contexts

I commission Early Years arts work for community settings

Other:

3. What sector do you work in? *

Please tick all of the following that apply

Check all that apply.

Arts

Arts, health & wellbeing

Community arts
 Education
 Learning & participation (outreach)
 Socially engaged arts practice
 Social care Special
 education

Other:

4. If you are an artist / creative practitioner, or work in partnership with an arts * organisation what practices do you most strongly align with?

Please select the top three items that apply.

Check all that apply.

Combined arts
 Dance
 Literature and libraries
 Music
 Theatre
 Visual arts (including museums and galleries)
 N/A

Other:

5. Do you work face-to-face as a practitioner with children aged 0-3 years? *

Mark only one oval.

Yes

No

Other:

6. For how many years have you been working with children aged 0-3 years? *

Mark only one oval.

less than a year

1-3y

4-6y

7-10y

10-15y 15-25y

25+y

Other:

7. What tools/ resources/ materials do you rely on in your creative work with young children?
This question is optional.

8. Please tell us about any theories, approaches or methods that inform your * ways of working with children aged 0-3 years.

It's fine to say 'none' or 'don't know'

9. Please tell us how you work with, and respond to the way in which children * aged 0-3 years know, experience and understand the world.

10. How do you listen to children aged 0-3 years old? *

It's fine to say: 'not sure', 'don't know'

11. What are the challenges in listening to 0-3 year-olds? *

It's fine to say: 'not sure', 'don't know'.

Four key areas for Arts Council England

The following section asks you to tell us how you are working, or intend to work with four themes that are important to Arts Council England. Please answer any/all questions that are relevant to your work with children aged 0-3 years in as much detail as you would like to give.

These questions are optional.

12. Please tell us about any **cross-sector partnerships** that you (or your organisation) are involved with that support creative work with children aged 0-3 years.

e.g., between arts/cultural organisations, health services, local authorities, charities, early childhood education and care, community groups.

13. Please tell us about **how you support caregivers**.

This may relate to supporting the carer-child relationship, parent mental health and confidence, or examples of co-creation of delivery and development of your work with carers.

14. **Access and Inclusion** Please tell about your, or your organisation's practice that is successful in reaching and impacting children who may experience barriers to engagement.

15. **Skills and Professional Development** Please give us any examples of knowledge sharing around the value of creativity with babies, young children and their families between your arts practice and non-arts organisations.

16. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about your work with children aged 0-3 years?

Case Study - Phase two of this project

Thank you for participating in this questionnaire so far.

Next, is information about the second phase of this research project, which will be the collection of a small number of case studies.

This phase of the study is scheduled for Summer 2024. Participants will be selected on the basis of questionnaire responses; examples from a variety of artforms; locations and organisations.

17. For the second phase of our research we are looking for artists, arts and/or * cultural organisations, or other sector organisations/practitioners with some strong examples of successful work that nurtures and recognises young children's creativity and reflects the key areas of importance for Arts Council England:

Cross-sector partnerships
 Support for caregivers
 Access & inclusion
 Skills & professional development

We would love to contact you for a follow up discussion.

(We cannot guarantee that we will be able to get in touch. This will depend on the numbers of interested participants)

Please indicate below if we may contact you.

Mark only one oval.

Yes No

18. If you
 answered
 'Yes' above -
 What is your
 full name?

19. and your email address?

20. Separately, Arts Council England wants to "share stories about amazing creativity and culture for early years. If you would be happy for your work to be promoted by Arts Council England, please provide your email address below so the Arts Council can contact you to learn more about your work"

THANK YOU for sharing your information and thoughts with us.

14.2. Appendix B

Bi Frequency of responses to Q: Which of the following options best describes you? (Select all that apply)

Role	Frequency of responses (N=97)	%	Notes
Artist / Creative practitioner (also includes: n=1 creative arts facilitator and n=1 dance class leader)	56	57.7%	n=9 (16%) respondents include other roles in their responses eg., mentor/researcher (n=1); arts org. administration (n=8); commission arts work (n=5, of whom n=3 also commission arts work for community settings)
Commissioner of EY arts for arts organisation	19	19.6%	n=2 commission work for community settings; n=1 commissions work for social care; n=1 is also leader of arts organisation
Arts organisation administrator	18	18.6%	In addition to n=8 (44%) responses mentioned above, n=4 (22%) also commission for arts org, n=2 commission work for community settings, n=1 commissions work for health and social care. n=1 also works for Museums
Library work	6	6.2%	n=1 uses title Library artist
Museum work	5	5.2%	(including n=1 mentioned above)
Early years practitioner	4	4%	
Commissioner of EY arts work for health contexts	2	2%	
Director/Founder arts organisation	2	2%	
EY Artist, EY Researcher/Professor	3	3%	
Health practitioner	1	1%	

Senior stock and digital officer	1	1%	
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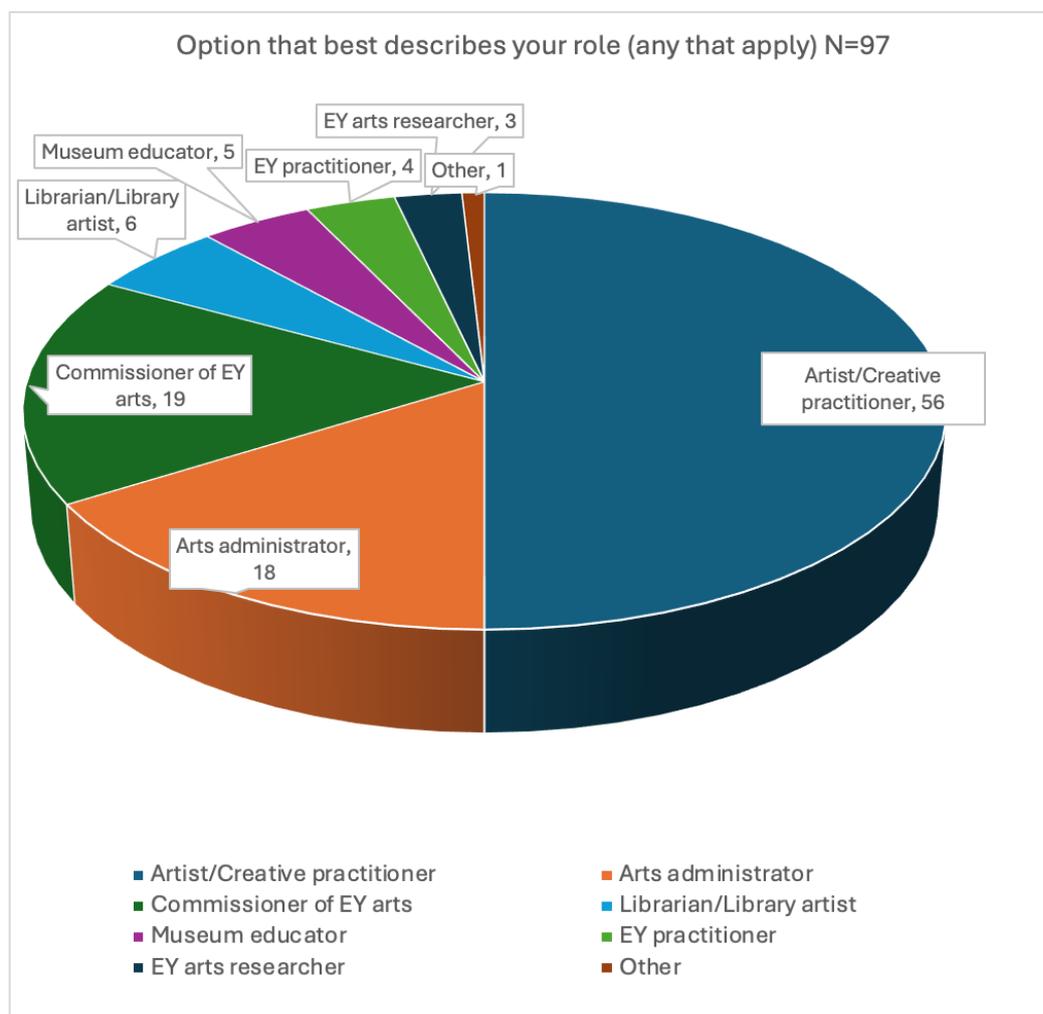


Figure Bii EY arts and creative practice roles - frequency of responses (N=97)

14.3 Appendix C

Frequency of responses to Q: Which sector do you work in? (Select all that apply)

Sector/s in which you work	Frequency of responses N=97	%	Notes
Arts	72	74%	n=5 respondents selected only Arts
Community arts	58	59.7%	

Education	57	58.7%	n=7 selected only Education
Arts, health & wellbeing (including:n=1 Art Psychotherapist)	50	51.5%	n=4 selected only Arts, health & wellbeing
Learning & Participation (Outreach)	42	43%	
Socially engaged arts practice	40	41%	n=1 selected only socially engaged arts practice
Special education	26	27%	
Libraries	7	7.2%	n=6 selected only Libraries
Social Care	7	7.2%	
Museums	5	5%	n=1 selected only Museums
Heritage	2	2%	n=1 selected only Heritage
Other: (n=1 responses for each category):	5		
Research			
Initial Teacher Education			
EY arts festival			
Sustainable education			
Rural context			

14.4 Appendix D

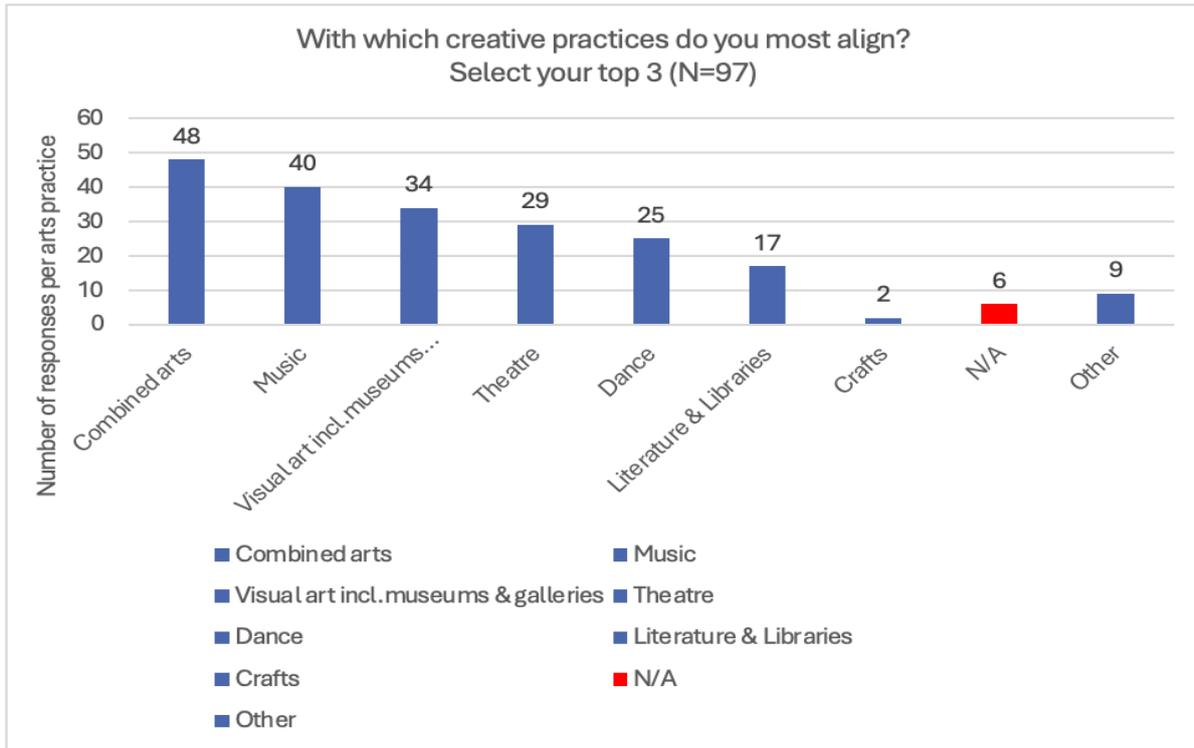
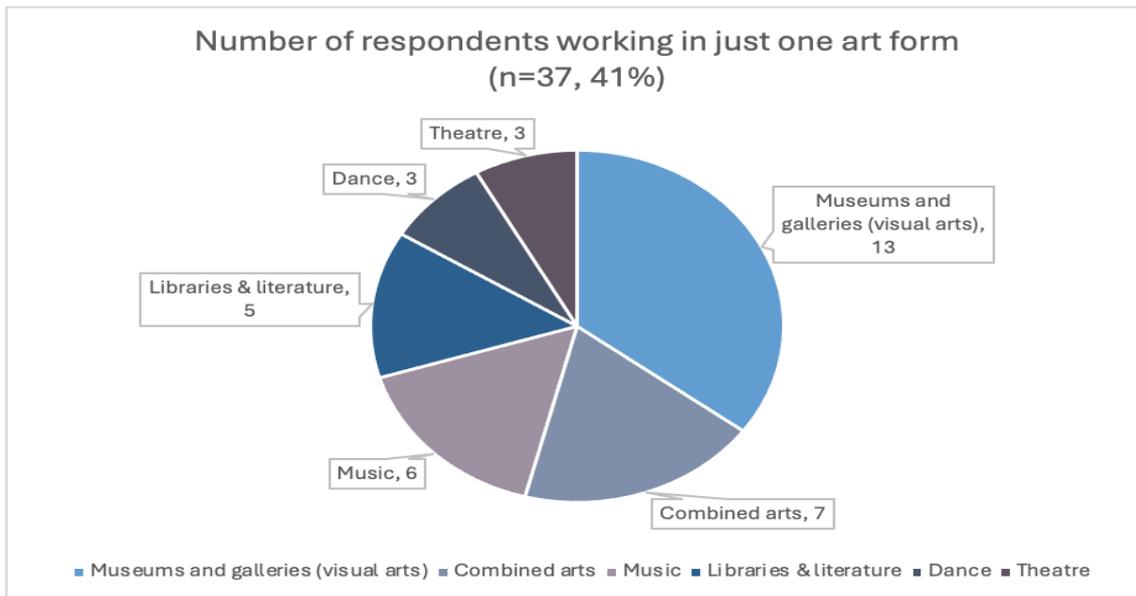


Figure D Frequency counts for Q:With which practices do you most strongly align?
Other category: outdoor, film making, puppetry, play, design of spaces/environments, knowledge exchange with university, arts, cultural and education sectors, theatre design, opera, animation

14.4 Appendix D ii



14.5 Appendix E

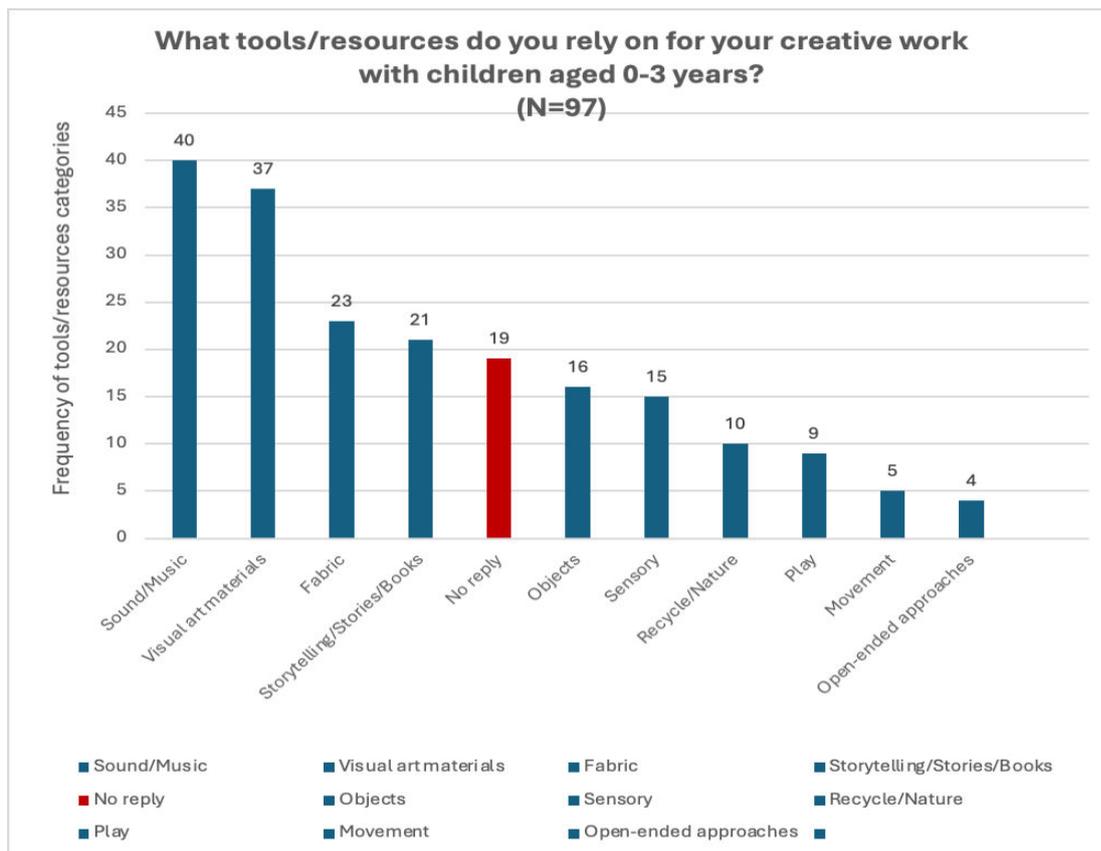


Figure F Tangible tools and resources that practitioners rely on in their work with children aged 0-3 years

Objects category includes: Everyday materials, household objects, intelligent materials, found objects, non-waste objects, Objects, Loose Parts, Sensory objects, Magnets, Materials selected in response to the unique East Sussex environment

14.6 Appendix F

Theory count - Early childhood Art & Music theory

Many theories and approaches were mentioned in domains of early childhood art and music theory (Reggio Emilia, Kodaly, Dalcroze, Loose parts). These theories seem to move transversely across art forms.

For example Reggio Emilia was cited by 18 respondents as a theoretical approach. These practitioners allied themselves across art domains, often more than one art form: 10 worked combined arts, 9 worked in visual art forms and museums and libraries, 5 in music, 5 in dance, 4 in theatre. Of these 10 identified as an arts practitioner, 5 as a commissioner of work for young children, 1 as an Educator, 1 an academic and 1 museum specialist. The 6 Respondents who cited early childhood music theorists (Dalcroze, Kodaly, Orff, Gordon) worked across combined arts (3) music (4), community arts (1) education (1) and special education (1).

This crossing over and blurring of art forms exemplifies the trans-disciplinary nature of working with young children.

Wider Early Childhood theories

In the domain of general early childhood education theories, a similar transdisciplinary, cross-arts picture emerges. For example Froebelian theory is cited across art forms. Of the 10 respondents who mentioned Froebel 5 worked in combined arts and/also 2 in music, 2 in dance 5 in visual art.

Piaget & Vygotsky make a predictable, but not dominant appearance being cited by 6 respondents from arts, academic, education and museum backgrounds working across combined and visual art forms.

More recent early childhood educators and researchers also appear. The Mosaic approach of Alison Clark (2001), Play as a medium for learning from Tina Bruce (1991), Cathy Nutbrown's (2011) seminal work on schemas as well as Helicopter stories originating from the work of Vivian Gussin Paley (1986). Stephen Nicholson's (19) Theory of Loose Parts.

13.7 Appendix G

Table showing frequency of themes related to Support for Caregivers (N=83)

Term	Frequency (by number of respondents) N=83	Indicative responses
Support	27	<i>Working in a supportive way with parents - starting from where they feel comfortable.</i>
Space	26	<i>Creating spaces to talk, to be silent, to be immersed in creative processes and to interact and bond with others within authentic and caring relationships.</i>
Relationship	11	<i>We provide time before/after sessions for conversation, relationship building and social support.</i>
Share/ing	13	<i>The most important element is the sense of coming together, connecting with other children and caregivers and having a held space where everyone can share moments of celebration for children together.</i>
Time	13	<i>We take time for the adults to get to know each other and talk about issues and laugh about becoming parents and bond</i>
Model/ing	10	<i>We model ways of being creative with your child/ren, in a low stress and low judgement way.</i>
Wellbeing	10	<i>Designing workshops and activities that are focussed on wellbeing and care as well as creation and discovery</i>
Safe	10	<i>This is as much about creating a safe space for the adults/carers as it is for the children.</i>
Needs	8	<i>The sessions are co-curated and very responsive to the needs, energy of the care-givers and the children on the day.</i>
Creativity	8	<i>Parents agency: Parents expressing their own creativity, modeling creative learning processes to their children.</i>
Confidence	7	<i>We place great emphasis on developing the confidence of the adult in terms of creative play with their child</i>
Access	7	<i>Offering easy to access and free sessions is very important to me.</i>
Partner/ship	7	<i>a.) We can recommend partners for support b.) Parents are key partners in the programmes</i>
Bond/ing	5	<i>[...] to interact and bond with others within authentic and caring relationships.</i>
Include	5	<i>Include them [caregivers] in sessions so they can use activities at home</i>
Relax	4	<i>We think deeply about what will make our sessions enjoyable and relaxing for caregivers. Do they need space to chat with other adults? Where and how will they sit?</i>
Enjoy	4	<i>Parental enjoyment is, for example, key to the development of the books and resources we provide in families.</i>

13.8 Appendix H

Table showing frequency of themes related to Access and Inclusion (N=85)

Practices that respondents consider successful in reaching and impacting young children	Frequency (by number of respondents) N=85	Indicative responses
Including children with Special Education Needs	30	<i>Practitioners working with children with Special Educational Needs acknowledge and value each child, emphasising what they can do through a strengths-based perspective on disability.</i> University professor
Working with participants living in specific areas/low income (eg. areas of high deprivation)	29	<i>We work in a priority place and in communities of children experiencing poverty.</i> EY arts organisation administrator
Dependent on partnerships	17	<i>...[this] requires a strong partnership approach, working with relevant groups and agencies who our 'target audience' families have trusted relationships with[...]</i> National organisation
Adopting an Everybody Welcome approach	14	<i>Providing space that is open-ended - not outcome based - celebrating what children can do - not focussing on what they can;t do - celebrating parents, creating a culture where families look out for each other.</i> Artist/creative practitioner; Arts organisation administrator; Commissioner of EY arts work
Offering/creating safe, trusted spaces	11	<i>I choose to set up sessions in places that are seen as safe by parents - a local charity play space in a shop (sadly closed last week) or at the local library.</i> Artist/Creative practitioner/EY Mentor Researcher
Working to improve access to arts for young children	8	<i>We particularly focus on geographical areas where there may not be much arts provision and delivering to groups who do not have access to the arts or meeting artists.</i> Artist/creative practitioner
Flexible approach to working with young children	9	<i>To reach and impact these families requires flexibility in our model so that local partners can tailor our support to meet the needs of the</i>

		<i>families in their communities.</i> National organisation
Addressing language barriers	4	<i>Flyers are translated in other languages for families and outreach is done to ensure a wide range of global majority families attend our sessions.</i> Founder of an EY arts organisation

13.9 Appendix I

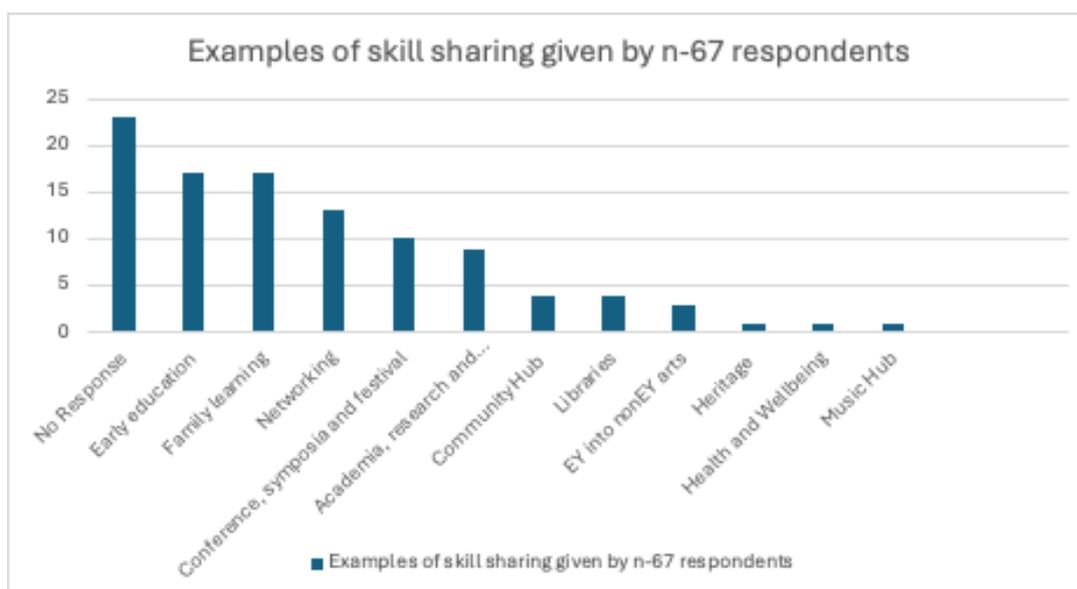


Figure I Frequency count of skill sharing opportunities

13.10 Appendix J Case Study interview schedule

- Tell us about your EC arts practice
- What do you like about working with young children?
- What proportion of your work is with young children?
- How do you like to work with young children? What are the characteristics of your work with young children?
- What are the challenges to this way of working?
- To what extent are you able to lead the inquiry in the work that you currently do?
- If yes, what has enabled that?
- If not - What would enable this?

- What do you need to be able to listen deeply to young children
- What do you need to respond to their ways of knowing and understanding the world?

- Do you work with any partners? Who do you work with?
- What are the issues, if any in working in partnership?

- How do you share your skills and knowledge ?
- With whom do you share your skills and knowledge?

- Do you feel your work with young children is recognised?
- What do you think would help its wider recognition?
- How do you connect with others who are working in a similar way with young children?

- How do you think ACE can support you to develop your EC arts practice?

- Have you been in receipt of DYCP for your EC arts practice?
- If yes:
 - What have been the advantages of the grant for you? For young children? Any disadvantages?
- If no:
 - Is this something you have considered? If so, what would you do?

- What do you think is the best way for ACE to invest in EC arts?