

‘Awakening Curiosity’: Integrating Arts-Based Approaches in Early Childhood Studies and Practitioner Training in Wales

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ABSTRACT

This article studies a teaching-led research process to explore diversity through arts, embedded in a final-year Professional Reflective Practice module within a BA Early Childhood Studies programme in Wales. The pedagogic experience has been informed by the Reggio Emilia philosophy and aligned with Curriculum for Wales. A series of arts-based workshops co-facilitated by an artist and a lecturer were implemented. Through reflective portfolios and creative outputs, students engaged with questions of professional identity, cultural inclusion, and the role of creativity in early years’ pedagogy. This practice discusses students’ perspectives on integrating creative approaches in their education/research practice and builds capacity to connect with diverse cultural expressions. Participants assented to take pictures of their work and creations. Anonymity of their reflections were protected. The discussion reveal that such interventions can strengthen reflective practice, critical thinking, enhance cultural awareness, and support the transition from student to professional pathways. Implications for practitioners’ training and early years pedagogy and research are discussed.

Keywords: arts, teaching-led research, cultural diversity, early childhood Studies, higher education, Wales

Introduction

Curiosity and creativity are often cited as fundamental characteristics in early childhood studies/education. However, if we hope to nurture these qualities in children, we must first awaken them in ourselves, as educators/researchers. This principle underpinned a teaching-led research process with final-year students of a BA Early Childhood Studies (ECS) programme in Wales. The project explores how arts-based practices can enhance students' reflection, advance creative pedagogy, and develop research skills, critical thinking, and community engagement.

At this transition from study to practice, arts offer a unique lens for critical reflection, challenging assumptions and articulating professional identity with cultural sensitivity (Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 2011).

Literature

Arts-based learning in Wales and internationally promotes a creative-critical approach to education/research as well as holistic development, well-being, and deeper engagement among students, educators, and communities. In the development of Curriculum for Wales/CfW (Welsh Government/WG 2022; Education Wales 2022), Expressive Arts and creativity support children to build up knowledge, solve problems and express ideas. Arts generate opportunities to facilitate experiences that connect with cultural expressions and celebrate diversity (WG 2020). This link with cultural diversity builds up a sense of belonging that encourages learning through creative experiences and promote a sense of "Cynefin"-a Welsh concept referring to a sense of belonging and connection to place, culture, and identity (Education Wales, 2022). Adams (2024) states that "Cynefin needs to be experienced in order to be understood" (p. 2). Rooted in place and shared diversity, this project uses arts to connect personal experience with cultural awareness. Cynefin embodies Welsh identity through its deep cultural, social, and historical bonds, reflecting on a profound sense of belonging without privileging hierarchical or origin-based interpretations. As Adams notes, it reflects "roots rather than routes to Welsh citizenship" (p. 2), prioritising positionality and continuity over procedural affiliation.

In Wales, the Creative Learning through the Arts programme (Arts Council of Wales, n.d.) has promoted arts-integrated education aligned with CfW, promoting collaboration between teachers and arts practitioners. Supported by WG investment in professional development (Education Wales, 2022), these education/research efforts remain limited in early years contexts. Yet, undergraduate early childhood students represent a vital force for embedding creative, critical approaches in education and research from the outset, with an impact on practice.

The Reggio Emilia Approach

The pedagogic principles of the experience are inspired by the Reggio Emilia philosophy which positions children as competent, curious meaning-makers, capable of expressing understanding through multiple “languages”—aesthetic, kinesthetic, oral, and visual (Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 2011). Reggio-inspired pedagogy integrates creative practice into every aspect of learning, supported by an *atelier* (creative studio) and the guidance of an *atelierista* (artist/educator). This pedagogical stance invites educators and *atelieristas* (artists working alongside educators) to design learning environments that provoke creativity, dialogue, and critical reflection (Vecchi, 2013; Tur Porres, 2020).

The use of *artistic provocations*, materials and stimuli designed to elicit inquiry and interpretation, are powerful tools for meaning-making, supporting not only children's learning but also practitioners' reflective and research capacities. As Harland (2016) suggests, teaching-led research can provide a space for professional inquiry and growth, bridging academic theory with practical application. This framework invites sustained critical reflection and relational co-construction of knowledge through arts (Vecchi, 2013).

Methods

This teaching-led research process used creative, arts-based activities to explore how CfW (WG, 2022) can be interpreted within undergraduate learning. It offers insight into higher-education learning-teaching practices by examining creative research-informed approaches within a final-year cohort, supporting students' critical engagement with cultural and human diversity.

A qualitative, teaching-led approach informed by the Reggio Emilia philosophy (Malaguzzi, 2021; Chicken et al., 2024) shaped the design of this pedagogic/research process. The methods centred on planning and facilitating artistic interventions (Clark, 2017), where students engaged with a guest artist and lecturer to experience arts-based processes similar to those used with young children. Activities introduced stories of “hidden/unseen” women from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds in Wales, alongside opportunities to experiment with painting and self-portrait techniques. Through this creative sequence, students developed their own artistic responses and reflected on how arts-based practices can support communication and inquiry with young children. This pedagogical structure naturally led into the ethical considerations underpinning the teaching-led research dimension of the work.

Ethical considerations

Ethical practice was grounded in community-engaged and decolonising traditions that centre relational accountability (Smith, 1999; Paris and Winn, 2014). Workshops were situated within a reflective/creative pedagogical framework in which students explored identities through arts-based interventions. Consistent with decolonising methodologies, a dialogic assent process was used in place of formal written consent. This approach supported a low-power, relational ethical environment in which students could make informed, voluntary decisions through ongoing conversation rather than transactional paperwork (Everley, 2021). Students assented to the use of anonymised reflections and photographs of their creative work for educational and research purposes, in line with sector guidance on ethical practice in pedagogical research (BERA, 2018). Participation was entirely voluntary, and students were reminded throughout that they could withdraw their assent at any point without consequence.

The project incorporated publicly available archival images of women from diverse cultural backgrounds in Wales. These were used as creative prompts in accordance with their permissions. Ethical reflexivity was embedded throughout the process, including attention to power dynamics and the need to create a learning environment that was both supportive and critically generative. The project therefore integrates decolonising principles, relational ethics, and

arts-based methods to support students' development as reflective practitioners/emerging researchers, while ensuring that their agency and cultural identities remained central to the research process.

Underpinning question:

What are early childhood undergraduate students' perspectives on integrating arts in their learning-teaching experience?

Project implementation:

The artistic and reflective workshops formed part of a Professional Reflective Practice module and were delivered to a cohort of BA ECS students (2022-2023). This teaching-led research was embedded across three sequential workshops, offered over several weeks before students began their placements in early childhood settings.

Workshops were co-designed and co-facilitated by the lecturer and visiting artist. Reflective sketchbooks, visual artefacts, and written reflections served as core data sources (Blaisdell et.al. 2019; Clark 2017).

Workshop 1: Drawing/Shared Experience

The initial workshop was designed to immerse participants in the experiential processes of art-making, through the lens of childhood artistic engagement. Facilitated collaboratively by the guest artist and lecturer, the session aimed to provide a multi-sensory introduction to artistic expression whilst emphasising the communicative potential of arts.

A core objective of the workshop was to simulate the ways in which children engage with and experience arts, thereby promoting empathetic and reflective understanding among participants (Blaisdell et al. 2019). Through hands-on activities, including experimentation with a variety of art materials, participants were encouraged to explore the tactile and emotional dimensions of drawing. This included focused practice on self-portrait techniques as a means of both self-reflection and artistic skill development.

In addition to practical engagement, the workshop served as a foundational platform for intellectual inquiry. Students were prompted to initiate research related to the representation of culturally/ethnically diverse women who have made significant contributions within Wales across various domains. This component was intended to prepare students for a subsequent session and to encourage a critical examination of identity, representation, and cultural narratives within the arts. The workshop emphasised the interconnection between personal expression, pedagogical understanding, and socio-cultural awareness in arts/ education.

Workshop 2: Cultural Identity/Artistic Reflection

The second workshop expanded upon the foundations established in Workshop 1, with a continued emphasis on self-expression, cultural awareness, and the role of arts in education/research. This session engaged participants in a deeper exploration of identity through artistic and historical inquiry, focusing on “unseen” women from diverse cultural/ethnic backgrounds in Welsh history. The Welsh concept of *Cynefin*, denoting a sense of belonging and rootedness within one’s environment, served as a guiding framework for the workshop’s reflective aims (WG 2021)

Participants were introduced to biographical narratives of historically underrepresented Welsh women, whose contributions span diverse cultural and professional domains. This historical engagement was intended to foster a critical understanding of inclusion, visibility, and cultural memory. In response, participants created self-portraits that not only incorporated painting techniques developed in the first workshop, but also integrated elements of their own cultural identities and sense of *Cynefin*.

The session also incorporated structured reflective practices, including group discussions and individual narrative writing (Gjessing, Kristensen and Risør, 2023). These reflections encouraged participants to consider the communicative and developmental potential of arts in early childhood. Emphasis was placed on the use of arts to support children’s emotional expression, identity formation, and holistic development (Blaisdell et al. 2019).

Figures 1–5: Drawing and connecting with stories of women from diverse cultural backgrounds in Wales:

Figure 1

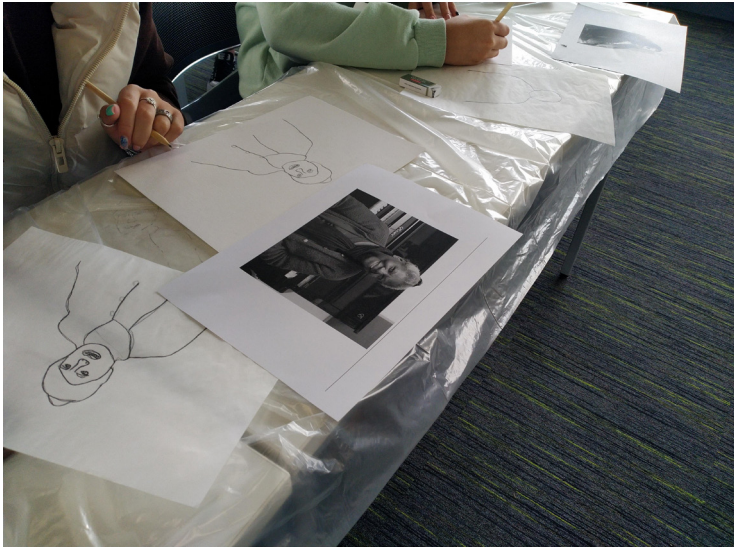


Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Workshop 3: Self-Portraits/Professional Identity

The final session in the workshop series brought together the thematic and experiential strands developed across the previous workshops. With a focus on synthesising personal and professional narratives through visual self-expression (Haeyen, Heres and Pol, 2024; Westerhof, Alea and Bluck, 2020), this session invited participants to reflect critically on the role of arts in early years and on their evolving identities as educators/researchers and individuals.

The creation of self-portraits functioned not only as aesthetic expressions but also as reflective artefacts-embodiment participants' understandings of self, place, and professional purpose. The workshop encouraged experimentation, inviting students to consider how particular textures, forms, and images could represent facets of their cultural identities, experiences, and aspirations within the context of early childhood practice/research.

This session also served as a reflective space in which participants revisited the pedagogical role of arts. Discussions focused on how creative practices can support the holistic development of children and can act as a communicative bridge between educators-children within environments that value well-being, inclusion and cultural awareness.

The conclusion of the workshop was the curation of a final exercise and group exhibition, presenting participants' self-portraits alongside written reflections. This exhibition was both a pedagogical tool and a reflective display designed to initiate dialogue on the transformative potential of creative practice and research in education. A group discussion accompanied the exhibit, facilitating critical engagement with the implications of arts for professional identity, early years pedagogy and research.

Figure 6: Example of self-portraits 'connecting to oneself and others'



The session concluded with participants assessing their individual and collective experiences throughout the workshop series. Emphasis was placed on how arts-based methods can inform not only education/research practices but also broader understandings of educator identity, relational pedagogy, and cultural engagement.

Results and discussion

This workshop series provided an innovative, teacher-led research process to critically examine how arts-based approaches can enhance both personal and pedagogical transformation among early childhood undergraduate students. It served as an experiential framework through which participants could engage with the creative process not only as future educators but as reflective researchers capable of critically interrogating cultural narratives, pedagogical traditions, and own identities (Haeyen, Heres and Pol, 2024; Clark 2017). The workshops contributed to explore novel methods aligned with CfWV, particularly on Cynefin (Adams, 2024; Chapman et al., 2023). Through engagement with self-portraits, storytelling, and historical inquiry, students were invited to consider the cultural and emotional dimensions of working with children in ways that affirm identity, diversity, and shared humanity (Haeyen, Heres and Pol, 2024; Blaisdell et al., 2019; Clark, 2017).

Creativity and professional confidence

Thematic analysis of student reflections revealed a revival of creativity and professional confidence (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Students expressed a renewed sense of playfulness and willingness to experiment with new approaches. The act of creating art nurtured not only aesthetic appreciation but also cognitive and emotional insight. One student remarked ‘I felt inspired to try new things-not just in art, but in how I plan activities with children’, suggesting a direct translation of creative strategies from the workshop into educational practice. Some participants reported adapting the workshop self-portrait activities with children: ‘This morning, I set up a station for the children to create their own self-portraits. They loved it’. Another observed ‘Although children are different, they still belong in a

community', demonstrating the workshop's impact on students' understanding of inclusion and belonging in practice. Another student added 'Art made me reflect differently. I was surprised how much came out through drawing', highlighting the reflective depth achieved through visual expression. These narratives relate to studies that discussed how arts enhance critical thinking, creativity and well-being (Alsaqabi and Alazmi, 2024). Mastandrea, Fagioli and Biasi (2019) also explore how aesthetic experiences, especially those involving visual arts, can positively influence mood, reduce stress, and promote overall well-being.

Culturally diverse identities

A second theme concerned hidden or marginalised narratives, particularly stories of women from diverse cultural backgrounds in Wales. This prompted critical reflection on representation, identity, and inclusion in early childhood contexts. Students questioned whose histories are shared in nurseries and recognised gaps in their own knowledge: 'I realised how little I knew about Wales outside my own experience.' Such reflections highlight the importance of integrating cultural plurality and historical depth into early years pedagogy, associated with anti-racist and decolonial imperatives. Donahaye (2012) research highlights the importance of recovering suppressed narratives, particularly those of Welsh and Jewish literary/cultural history, to broaden public memory and cultural understanding. Similarly, the anthology *Seventy Years of Struggle and Achievement* (Lavine, Upadhyaya and Weedon, 2021) offers first-person accounts that highlight the resilience and contributions of ethnic minority women, making it a valuable resource for inclusive educational practices. These efforts align with the Welsh Government's commitment to embedding ethnic minority histories into the curriculum and promoting anti-racist education (Welsh Government, 2021).

Implications for Higher Education and Policy

Preliminary analysis highlights the value of embedding arts-based and reflective approaches within ECS curricula. Building capacity among pre-service educators/ researchers to critically engage with identity, culture, and pedagogy through creative expression is foundational for reflective practitioners/researchers.

Arts-based methodologies support deep personal insight and help students articulate emerging professional identities in ways traditional pedagogies may overlook (White and Lemieux 2015). These approaches support with broader educational goals emphasising holistic development, participatory learning, and the nurturing of curiosity and empathy (McDermott 2002). The findings point to the need for policy frameworks and academic programmes to support interdisciplinary, arts-integrated pedagogies that prepare educators to navigate multicultural educational landscapes with criticality and creativity (Pool, Dittrich and Pool, 2011).

Conclusion

This study demonstrates the value of integrating arts-based, reflective practices into early childhood studies/research. The workshops enabled students to explore creative methods and strengthen professional identity, research capacity, and pedagogical confidence. Engagement with 'hidden' histories of women in Wales encouraged critical reflection on cultural narratives, while self-portraits emerged as a transformative tool for articulating identity and intention as educators/researchers. Students reported deeper understanding of inclusion, creativity, and belonging/Cynefin. A key limitation was timing, as students were balancing research writing and placement preparation, affecting attendance. Nonetheless, participants described the sessions as 'a welcome space to decompress' and to refocus on core professional values. Future interventions would benefit from earlier integration into programmes, and wider sector capacity-building may strengthen the uptake of arts-based and reflective pedagogies. Further research could explore how creative approaches within CfVW promote curiosity and reflection among educators/researchers, enriching discourse on pedagogical innovation in early childhood studies.

Acknowledgments

The authors of this paper want to thank the participation of undergraduate students at the BA Early Childhood Studies and the Student Support team at Swansea University for making this project possible.

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