**Artful Dodgers**

**An arts education research project in early education settings**

**Abstract**

*Artful Dodgers* is an arts education research project developed by two artists and Fingal County Council Arts Office; and delivered in partnership with Fingal County Childcare Committee and the Arts Education Research Group (AERG) in Trinity College Dublin, in two early years settings in north county Dublin. Both early years settings are located in areas of economic and social disadvantage. *Artful Dodgers* is a music and visual arts programme designed in two phases and implemented with early years teachers of children aged three to five years. The study aimed to examine whether music and the visual arts could enhance children’s early literacy and numeracy skills, and build the capacity of the early years teachers and their understanding of *Aistear*? *Artful Dodgers* is the first research project to implement a new collaborative approach to research in the field of arts education using the DIEAC Framework (Design, Implementation and Evaluation of Arts in Context) developed by Carmel O’Sullivan and Sarah Tuck. This framework is proposed on the basis of providing an adaptive and flexible tool to be used by artists, commissioners, funders, communities (and others) in the planning, implementation, evaluation and resourcing of collaborative arts in social, educational and community contexts. The project team adopted an ‘artist is residence’ model for Phase 1 where both artists were located in the services on a weekly basis over a twelve week period. Each week they delivered a music and visual arts workshop in partnership with the staff of both settings. The ‘artist in residence’ model was significant in that the artists were embedded within the settings allowing the artists, early years teachers and children to build relationships and to get to know each other over time. Over the period of the residency the artists worked closely with the children and early years teachers in both settings, where they explored the world of music and visual arts together. The artists used the ORID[[1]](#footnote-1) framework with the early years teachers to evaluate and reflect on the process. This framework facilitates focused conversation between participants in order to reach some point of agreement or clarify differences.

The evaluation of Phase 1 of the *Artful Dodgers* programme indicates changes in pedagogical planning and style in the early years teachers over the twelve weeks period of the artists’ residency. Their language became more reflective and their practice incorporated a wider and richer range of materials; there was greater evidence of more child-led activities and unstructured play opportunities over the duration of the study. The data suggests that children’s social, cooperative and communication skills were enhanced. There was evidence over time of improved self-regulation, recall and recollection, and attention to activities. In addition, children’s curiosity and exploration was encouraged leading to enhanced vocabulary and greater persistence at activities. This evaluation is complete and will be available in a forthcoming academic article.

Phase 2 of *Artful Dodgers* followed immediately after Phase 1 and was developed to assist the sustainability of the learning and practices developed during the ‘artist in residence’ phase. It encouraged the early years teachers to continue with the arts in their practice and the artists came to work with staff in both settings once a month. This kept the momentum of the project going without interruption. The focus of Phase 2 was to develop ‘creative exchange’ between both the artists and early years teachers through a co-mentoring process. It was designed to consolidate arts practice within the early years settings, build a creative environment and strengthen relationships between the participants (artists and early years teachers) through reflecting on practice and children’s engagement.

A preliminary evaluation of Phase 2 suggests that changes occurred in early years practice, in terms of curriculum planning, relationships with children, staff and parents. Co-mentoring across different disciplines is very powerful particularly when it is experiential and all parties, in this case artists and early years teachers, are actively involved. The artists highlighted the value of the co-mentoring approach which informed their planning for each setting visits. The early years teachers reported better understandings of children’s learning and sensitivity to the uniqueness of every child. They also reported a deepening understanding of Aistear, the early childhood curriculum framework and a greater appreciation of the importance of ‘tuning in’ and responding to the children’s behaviour. An analysis of the findings from this phase of the project is underway.

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1. The framework was developed at the Canadian Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)