


**Connecting Contemporary Art and Children's Play
in Boston Public Schools' Early Childhood Programs**



ARTIP LA

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Art|Play was run as a partnership between Project Zero, the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and Boston Public Schools. The project was led by Dr. Louisa Penfold (Project Director at Project Zero) and Dr. Steve Seidel (Principal Investigator at Project Zero).

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Department of
Early Childhood



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Project Overview

The arts play a critical role in children's lives, opening opportunities for them to create new connections between themselves, other people, and the constantly changing world around them. They also develop the ability to imagine and experience the world from multiple perspectives (Greene, 2000), a function John Dewey (1934) identified as a foundational pillar of democracy.

Research has illustrated that the arts play a key role in preparing young children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physiological development for their entrance into school (Green & Sawilowsky, 2018; Kisida, 2018), including amongst low-income and at-risk children (Brown et al., 2010 & Brown & Sax, 2013). While further research is needed on the effects of arts participation on social-emotional skills within these underserved communities (Menzer, 2015), the case for integrating the arts as a key component of early childhood curriculum is clear. The importance of young children's learning with contemporary art has been identified in a longitudinal study undertaken by Macquarie University which found that these experiences contributed towards children's sense of belonging, cultural citizenship, embodied learning, and relationships with peers, and adults (Palmer et al., 2016).

While creativity has been flagged as critical in 21st-century education (Resnick, 2017), arts and play-based learning are often marginalized from classroom curricula to make way for literacy and numeracy skills taught through structured learning experiences (Robinson, 2000 & Dahlberg et al., 2007). At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted young children’s mental health and wellbeing, with kids being kept out of classrooms, confined to their homes, and enduring significant restrictions to joyfully play with one another (UNICEF, 2021). Teachers have also reported high rates of stress, anxiety, and burnout relating to their professional responsibilities across both online and in-person teaching platforms (UNESCO, 2020).

With engagement in the arts during childhood being the strongest predictor of an individual’s lifelong participation in the arts (Rabkin & Hedberg, 2011), questions of how to cultivate young children and their teacher’s equitable access to meaningful, engaging, and playful art experiences through public school systems are now more relevant than ever.

Art|Play was an 18-month Critical Participatory Action Research project investigating the integration of contemporary art into Boston Public Schools’ (BPS) early childhood programs through curriculum design and professional development opportunities. Artworks and archival materials from the Harvard Art Museums, the publicly available Smithsonian Learning Lab, and the Museum of Modern Art were used in curriculum design and professional development activities. Led by Dr. Steve Seidel and Dr. Louisa Penfold from Project Zero, funds from the National Endowment for the Arts were utilized to undertake primary data collection and analysis focused on constructing meaningful education practices with contemporary art for teachers and students.





“I have learned different ideas to implement that can be that can match that playful, and exploratory nature of children, and just how, like some steps to make things happen.”


- Boston Public Schools PreK Teacher

Executive Summary



Art|Play set out to investigate the challenges, opportunities, and practical applications of integrating modern and contemporary arts practices into Boston Public Schools Early Childhood program through curriculum development and professional development for teachers. With a steady decline of arts education across all tiers of education over the past 30 years (Rabkin & Hedberg, 2011), combined with budget constraints and competing education priorities in public education (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2021), questions of how to ensure children and their teacher’s equitable access to meaningful, engaging, and playful art experiences in public schools are now more relevant than ever. To explore this complex issue, the following research questions were identified:


- How do teachers engage and learn professional development experiences that connect contemporary art and children’s play?
- How do children learn and engage in experiences that connect them with contemporary artists, artworks, and/or artistic processes?
- What are the practices that facilitate these experiences for young learners and/or for teachers?
- What are the processes for documenting these experiences for young children and their teachers?
- What are the affordances of partnerships between artists, art museums, and Boston Public Schools’ early childhood program?

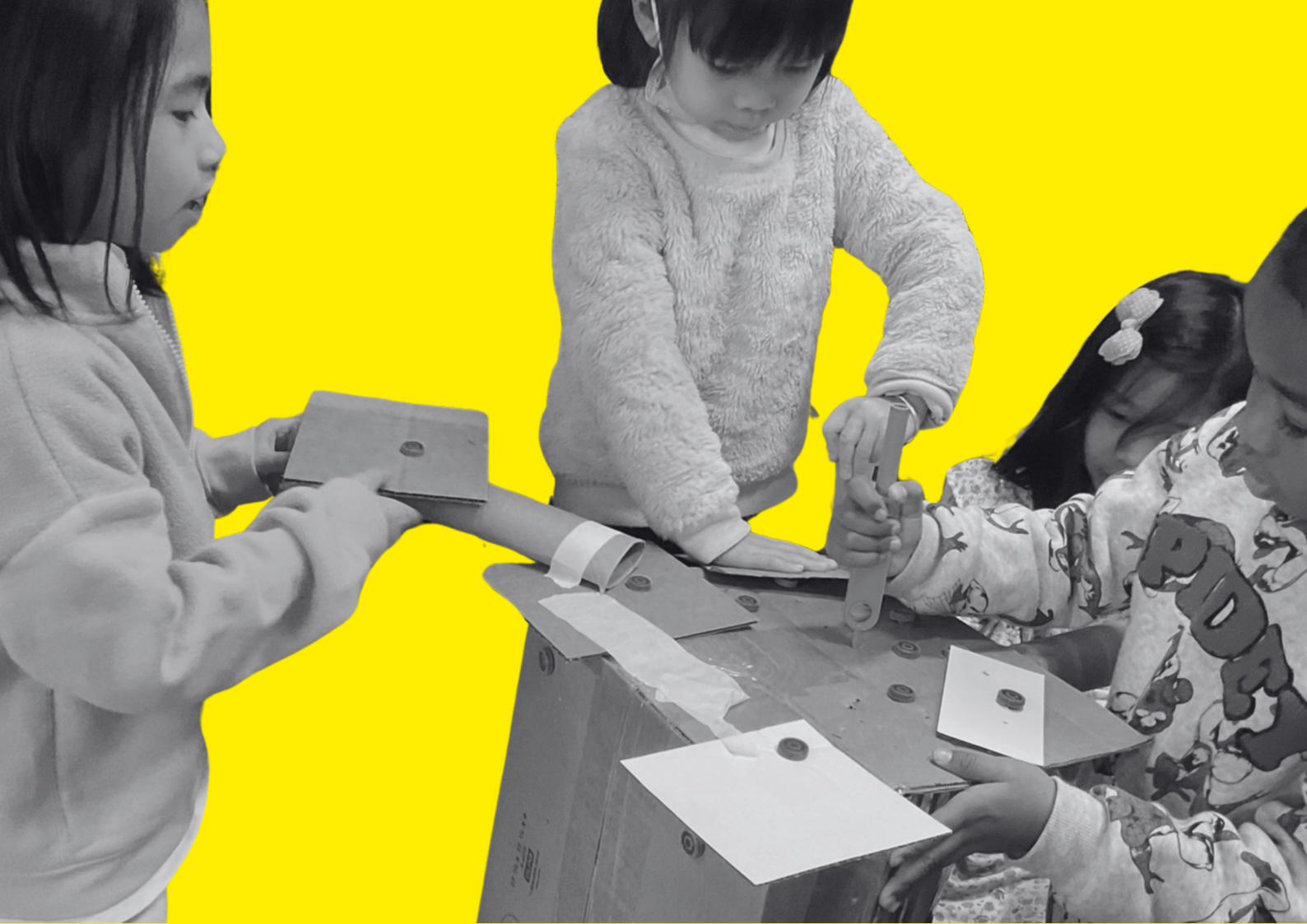


Alongside key findings, including the need to provide playful-hands on professional development experiences for teachers and generate children’s curriculum activities that center open-ended creative experimentation in classrooms, outcomes of this study include:

- 31 art activities that connect with modern and contemporary art practices which were integrated into BPS’ Focus on 3s and Focus on 4s curriculum. These curriculum activities were then implemented in 228 of BPS’ K0 and K1 classrooms in the 2023-2024 school year, reaching 4,088 BPS students.
- The development of 7 professional development workshops run with over 375 teachers, allowing participants direct engagement in learning experiences fostered an understanding of play-based learning and contemporary art practices through exposure to artworks and artists.
- A robust cultural-educational partnership model between BPS, art museums, Project Zero, and the Harvard Graduate School of Education. One teacher said that the partnerships between BPS and art museums were ‘empowering’ and ‘potentially life-changing’ for children who would otherwise not have access. This partnership simultaneously established a network of educators, artists, and administrators committed to children’s equitable access to the arts and distributed knowledge, expertise, and resources between different stakeholders.
- The Art | Play website (<https://pz.harvard.edu/projects/artplay>) that shares open-source curriculum activities, downloadable activity guides, and instructional videos for educators, parents, and caregivers.

Future recommendations for curriculum designers, administrators, and policy-makers include:

- Deepening connections between artists, cultural organizations, and public schools,
 - Expanding the Art | Play partnership model to include families, parents, and caregivers,
 - Generate new assessment frameworks centering children’s creative learning,
 - Explore opportunities to expand the Art | Play pedagogy to new grade levels and new urban school districts.
- 



“When I’m watching my students now, as they create, I have better questions, and better ways to draw out what they’re doing and ask them. I also now document different parts of a project more closely. After being a part of ArtPlay, I have become more curious about myself and my students. I am curious about what they’re thinking and sometimes they can’t verbalize what they are doing, but I can see it in the photographs.”

-Boston Public Schools PreK Teacher

Literature Review

Arts Education as a Human Right

Access to the arts at all stages of development, including very young children, is a fundamental human right, not a frill, a luxury, or something to offer only once all other areas of study have been mastered. Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) states:

1. Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts, and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.
2. Everyone has the right to the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary, or artistic production of which he or she is the author.

Building on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the resolution adopted by the United Nations General Assembly following the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) specifies in Article 13 that children “shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.” Public education is a central and critical site of access for children to the arts through facilitated engagement with works of art, meeting artists, and exploring making art.



Why the Arts Matter in Schools

While 88% of Americans believe that the arts are an essential part of a well-rounded education (Americans for the Arts, 2018), research has indicated a steady nationwide decline in access to them across all tiers of education over the past 30 years (Rabkin & Hedberg, 2011). The marginalization of the arts from curriculum has generated significant inequalities across different communities with a recent study highlighting white students being nearly twice as likely than Hispanic and African American students to have engaged in an arts education (Rabkin & Hedberg, 2011). Additionally, children whose parents have at least one tertiary education degree are six times more likely to have participated in an arts learning experience compared to those whose parents have less than a high school degree (Rabkin & Hedberg, 2011).

A recent study conducted by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (2021) on the arts in public education highlighted children's declining access due to budget constraints and competing educational priorities. In the United States, the funding of public schools - including arts programs - relies nearly entirely on the amount of property taxes generated in a school's neighborhood. This system results in an uneven distribution of funding between wealthy and under-resourced communities, exacerbating racial and economic disparities in funding the programs and resources that allow all students to access an arts education at school (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2021).

The Child as a Co-Constructor of Knowledge

Since the 1970s, new sociological perspectives on childhood have advocated for children's need to be positioned as 'co-constructors of knowledge, identity and culture' (Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence, 2007 & James et al. 1998). Within this, children are understood as capable beings who are able to participate in the production of ideas, spaces, and identities that shape their lives. By positioning children as co-constructors of knowledge, the new sociology of childhood aligns with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) which advocates for children's right to have their opinions heard on topics that affect them. This understanding of children as citizens who have the ability to participate in the formation of knowledge and culture when given the opportunity to do so was a foundational starting point for the design of children's curriculum activities in the Art | Play study.



Constructing Playful Pedagogies

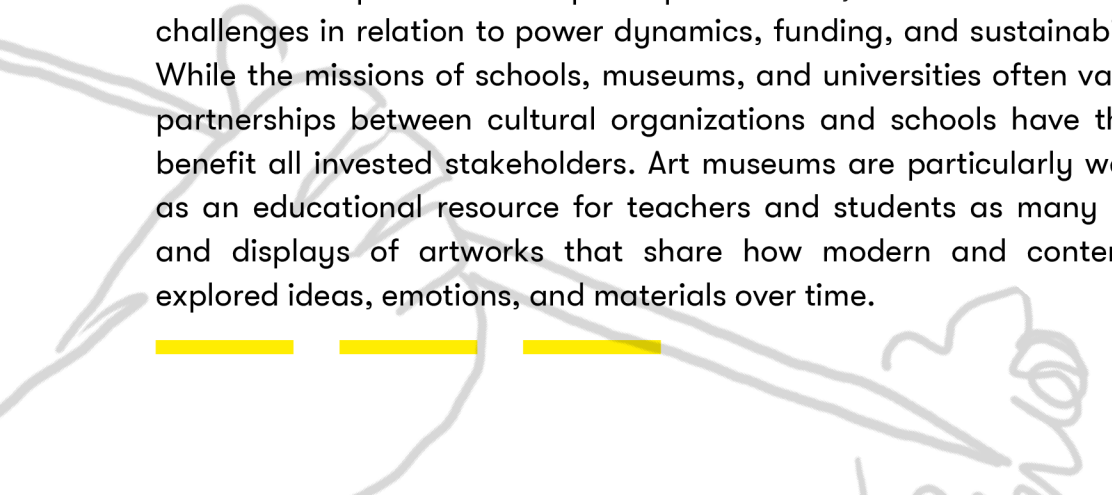
Play can be defined as a creative process that allows people to experience, understand, construct, and recreate understandings of themselves and the world around them (Sicart, 2014). Play is not a frivolous activity but a serious, creative, and complex process that produces new ways of thinking, expressing, and being (Mardell et al., 2023). This definition resonates with debates on children's human right to play as articulated in the United Nations Article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). While playful learning has been flagged as key in creating meaningful, engaging, and fun learning experiences for children, a current emphasis on standardized testing in schools, which predominantly assesses learning outcomes instead of creative and critical processes, has reduced children's opportunities to engage in open-ended learning experiences (Kirk & Dombro, 2014). In this study, we use this definition of play, in alignment with Article 31 of the UNCRC as a starting point for designing playful learning experiences for children and their educators.

Contemporary Art and Material Play

Ever since Froebel invented the first kindergarten in 1800s Germany, materials – both tangible and intangible – have been a core part of early childhood education (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2017). A New Materialist approach to children's creative learning argues that materials are active and participatory forces that open up new and divergent learning processes (Barad 2007 & 2011; Bennett, 2004 & 2010; Braidotti, 2013). Furthermore, as artists and designers produce novel ways of working with materials, including the fabrication of new ones, they provide dynamic springboards for educators to design children's material-based learning environments (Penfold, 2019a & 2019b).

Building Cultural-Educational Partnerships

Partnership in education can be defined as a collaborative relationship between various stakeholders, including parents, students, educators, and community organizations, that come together with a goal of supporting student learning through sharing resources and expertise (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). This definition is supported by findings from the United Kingdom's Creative Partnerships program (2002-2011), which aimed to construct a nationwide partnership model between schools and creative professionals, identified effective partnerships between schools and cultural organizations being characterized by mutual respect, shared goals, and active participation from all parties (Cox & Thomas, 2010). It is important to note that many different types of partnership models that promote arts participation exist, and are each marked by their own challenges in relation to power dynamics, funding, and sustainability (Ostrower, 2003). While the missions of schools, museums, and universities often vary greatly, productive partnerships between cultural organizations and schools have the ability to mutually benefit all invested stakeholders. Art museums are particularly well positioned to serve as an educational resource for teachers and students as many house rich collections and displays of artworks that share how modern and contemporary artists have explored ideas, emotions, and materials over time.



Research Context and Methods



Boston's Universal PreK Program

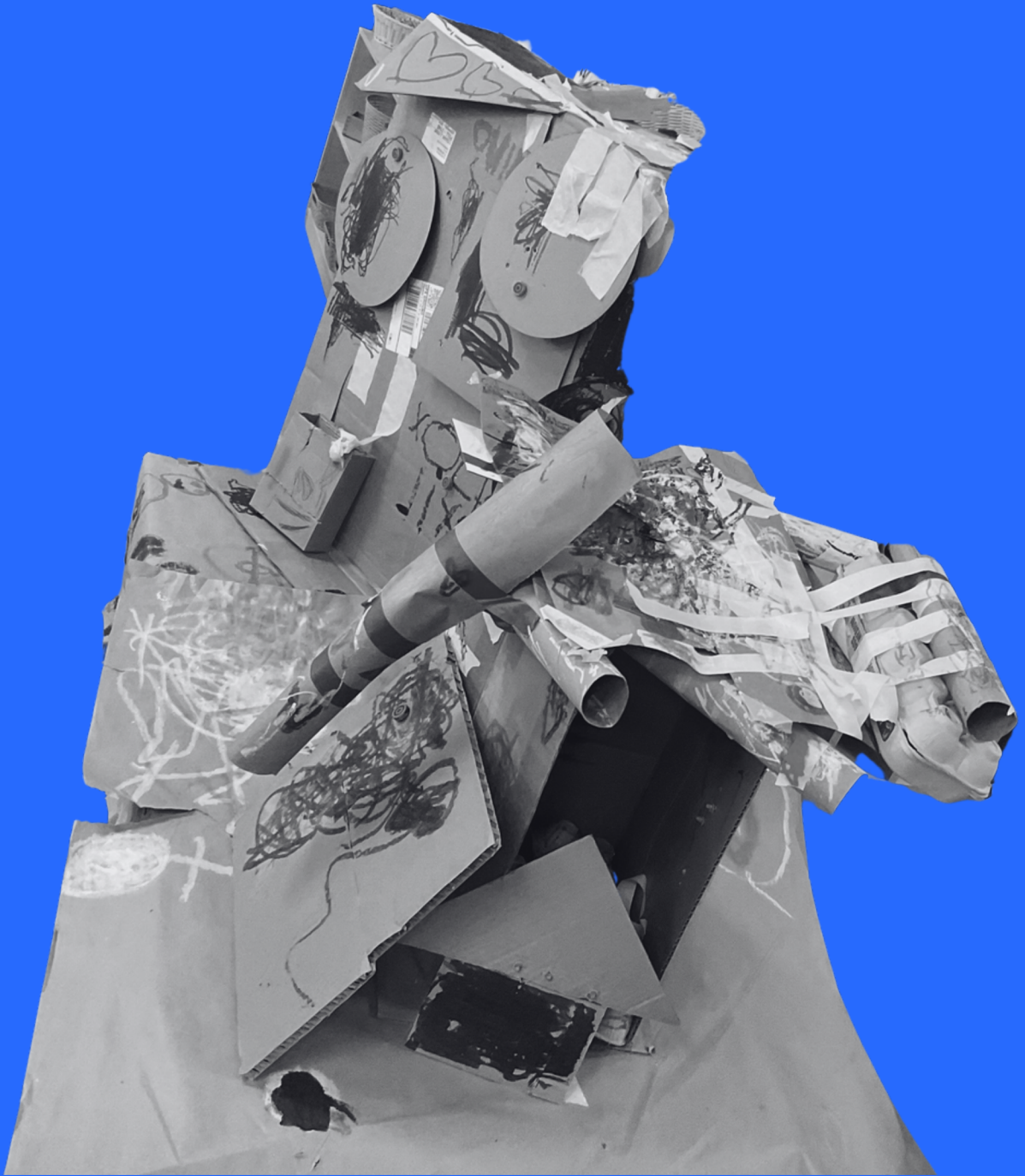
BPS' Department of Early Childhood, is a division of the city's public school system established in 2005 to oversee the City of Boston's public preK program. The BPS early childhood program is populated with children from predominantly underserved and culturally diverse communities. The Universal Pre-K (UPK) program is a free, government-financed program open to all children in the city. In 2020, the City of Boston announced it would be investing \$15 million in its 2020-2021 budget to expand its UPK offering to include all 4-year-olds across the city. Following this, in March 2022, Mayor Michelle Wu announced that the city would be expanding its UPK offering to include 3-year-olds (K0). Building on a rich history of partnership between BPS' Department of Early Childhood and Project Zero, the timing of the Art|Play study was strategically aligned with Boston Public Schools' roll out of UPK for three-year-olds and the accompanying design of the Focus on 3s curriculum as well as the redesign of the Focus on 4s curriculum.

Methodology, Methods, & Participants

To investigate the research focus, we operationalized a Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) methodology that allows practitioners and researchers to collaboratively plan, act/observe, reflect, and make changes to educational practices (Kemmis et al. 2014). The research activities for this project were carried out between January 1, 2023 to June 30, 2024 and orientated around six action research cycles. Each cycle consisted of curriculum planning, the development and observation of professional development workshops, interviews, and team meetings. Each research cycle produced curriculum activities, training, and resources to help facilitate student and teacher learning with contemporary art. While the Art|Play curriculum was rolled out to all K0 and K1 classrooms across the city of Boston, and all professional development sessions were made available to K0 and K1 teachers, we chose to work most deeply with a focus group of 6 classrooms. Data was generated from a variety of sources and situations, including staff interviews, team meetings, classroom observations, professional development observations, and curriculum documents. Research participants included:

Participant Role/Type	Number
Lead Teachers	6
Assistant Teachers	5
Children	48
BPS Curriculum Designers/Coaches	5
Art Museum Educators	4
Harvard Graduate School of Education Students	6
Project Zero Research Team	2





“I saw how the Art|Play activities connected to the research and connected with the artists. So that kind of gave me a strong foundation for bringing it back to the classroom”

-Boston Public Schools Elementary Art Teacher

Findings

1. Engaging Teachers in Creative and Playful Pedagogies

Five out of the six teachers interviewed discussed their primary motivation for attending relating to their desire to learn new art teaching strategies. One teacher, who had previously worked with slightly older children commented:

“I was feeling very uncertain of how best to serve early childhood kids. It [early childhood] wasn't my strength. And I was just looking for any kind of resource to be a better teacher for the youngest kids”. Another teacher described:

“I can take that thought process and bring it to my kids, and when I'm watching them now, as they create, I have better questions, and better ways to draw out what they're doing and ask them, and now I document different parts of a project more, much more closely, because I might not share with the parents, but I'm really curious myself about what they're thinking and sometimes they can't verbalize it, but I can see it in the photographs.”

Another teacher talked about the importance of the Art|Play pedagogy being backed by research and concrete educational theories, which she can then draw on when advocating for the arts at her school: “I saw how the Art|Play activities connected to the research and connected with the artists. So that kind of gave me a strong foundation for bringing it back to the classroom”.

The workshops spotlighted artworks, artists, and artistic processes featured in the Focus curriculum and allowed teachers to experience the curriculum activities through playing and making with materials, tools, and concepts before implementing them in the classroom with children.

Five out of the six teachers interviewed described wanting to gain inspiration and new creative ideas for the classroom, particularly ones connecting with contemporary artists they were not aware of. Three teachers talked about how attending the PD helped them gain confidence in teaching art by learning from contemporary artists and engaging in playful learning experiences. One teacher elaborated on this saying that following the Action Painting workshop they felt confident in facilitating the activity with their preschool children.

More specifically, the teacher was able to learn about and test out different ways of setting up the activity, and consider what materials and adaptations might work for their students: “I have learned different ideas to implement that can be that can match that playful, and exploratory nature of children, and just how, like some steps to make things happen.”



Image : Teachers explore different natural materials as part of the Art | Play natural materials PD workshop run at Harvard Graduate School of Education in February 2024.



Image : Teachers explore different painting techniques as part of the Art | Play action painting PD workshop run at the Harvard Art Museums in February 2024.



2. Children learn in multimodal and multisensory ways

Children engaged, responded, and learned through the Art | Play activities in multi-modal ways, demonstrating creative learning processes in alignment with the Five-Dimensional Model of Creativity (2016). When asked about the Sound Sculpture workshops teachers observed that the children were using the sound art activity to ask questions and problem solve. One teacher elaborated:

“So we combined the garden with sound, and they made wind chimes with beautiful stuff, and they did it in small groups. So we have three wind chimes, with the three small groups; they're fantastic. They put them all together and we hung them upstairs in our garden and they make music and the kids like to go up and they listen. Like what sound are we going to hear today? How's it going to? How is it going to work?”

Another teacher made the observation that the students continued to engage over time, especially with loose parts:

“The loose parts, kind of like loose parts. But there were things that will make interesting sounds. Yeah, that little table is still in the classroom and this is almost a month later and they go back to it. They use it, and they make sounds or they'll go get a container or they'll put something in it and they'll make another sound. They'll walk around the room and they'll say hey, listen, here's my new sound. So it adapted to the kids and the kids love it, and they keep doing it”

'SOUND SCULPTURE CLASSROOM OBSERVATION'

Art/Play Activity Name: Sound Sculptures
Classroom: 3 or 4 year old
Curriculum Unit: Part1
Observation Date: 1/30/2024
Observer: Aesther



The teacher encouraged the children to think about the sounds different materials (tin cans, candy wrappers, cardboard tubes, etc.) might make before demonstrating each item.

Reflective questions like "What do you notice?" and "How would you describe this sound?" were asked to make children think deeper.

The teacher introduced the Sound Sculpture activity after reading two books: Tap Tap Boom Boom by Elizabeth Bluemle and Song in the City by Daniel Bernstrom.

The introduction included a presentation of sound art by artists Nick Cave and Luke Jerram, taking 6-8 minutes to show the children how sound can be a part of art.



Children worked in teams to build cardboard sound sculptures or explored sound independently using different materials.

Some children created sound body suits inspired by Nick Cave and danced to generate sound, with the teacher supporting their creative process.

The activity lasted about 75 minutes, with plenty of time for exploration and experimentation, leading to high engagement and enjoyment.

The teacher introduced the idea of using wind to create sound and set up a fan to illustrate this.

Children were asked to select three different items to experiment with by creating various sounds for five minutes before moving on to the main activity of building sound sculptures.

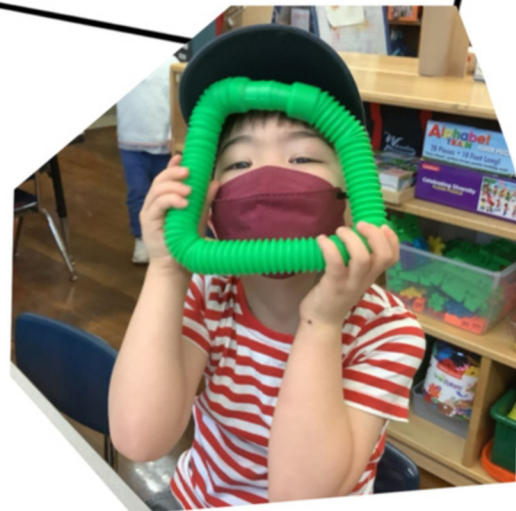


Image: Documentation generated from a Sound Sculpture Art | Play activity in a BPS K1 classroom



"Doesn't this look like a person? What's on top of the sculpture? Do they look like branches to you?"

"It looks like a tornado."
"The artist was thinking of a tree."



Child B was creating rhythmic tapping sounds with a metal spoon on a tin can, cardboard tube, and plastic accordion tube.

Child A was figuring out how to expand the accordion tubes and eventually connected the two ends. He continued expanding and contracting the tubes to create sounds.



She continued to use the metal spoons she was experimenting with earlier and attached them to her sound skirt made of plastic netting. Over the course of the class, she added more materials to the skirt and began to shake and dance to create jingling sounds.

Children were also engaged with making sounds using wind created by the fan. Child C (holding the tin bucket), for instance, utilized the movement of the wind to make the attached materials interact with each other and create sound.



Image: Documentation generated from a Sound Sculpture Art | Play activity in a BPS K1 classroom

3. Practices that center material play, agency, and contemporary art practices

The Art|Play professional development sessions and curriculum activities exposed 375 teachers to teaching and learning methods that support children’s creative and inquiry-driven learning processes through contemporary and modern art. When asked about their existing teaching philosophy, teachers discussed various types of teaching strategies. Three key themes emerged from the analysis: teachers discussed student agency and providing tools to express creativity; focusing on playfulness with materials; and moving from product to process art practices.

Two out of four curriculum designers interviewed had worked on writing previous iterations of the BPS early childhood curriculum. When asked about the distinction between previous art activities featured in that curriculum and the Art|Play activities, they described the following four practices:

- A shift from product-orientated activities, such as drawing self-portraits, to more open-ended material-play activities,
- A wider variety of artistic mediums, such as sound, natural materials, and light,
- A more intentional emphasis on featuring contemporary artists from diverse backgrounds.
- Emphasizing contemporary artists who are responding to issues and activities that are happening in the world now

These practices also illustrate the importance and possibilities of interconnecting state standards with playful, open-ended arts activities. Analysis of the curriculum designer interviews identified two key motivations behind BPS’ curriculum design/redesign as being: 1) to make sure activities were speaking to the standards in a clear and focused way 2) and to include more diverse representations of authors, thinkers, and artists.



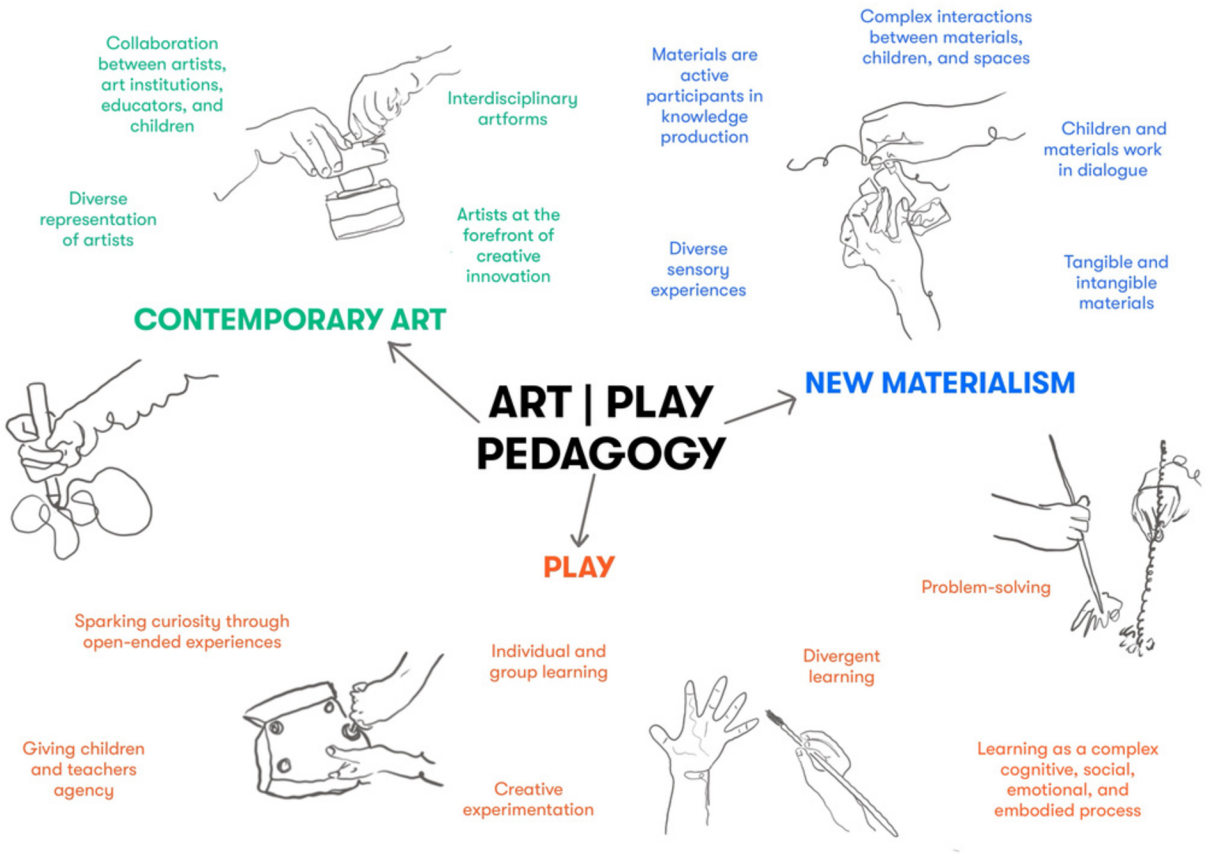


Image: Illustration of the Art | Play pedagogy by Nanvi Jhala



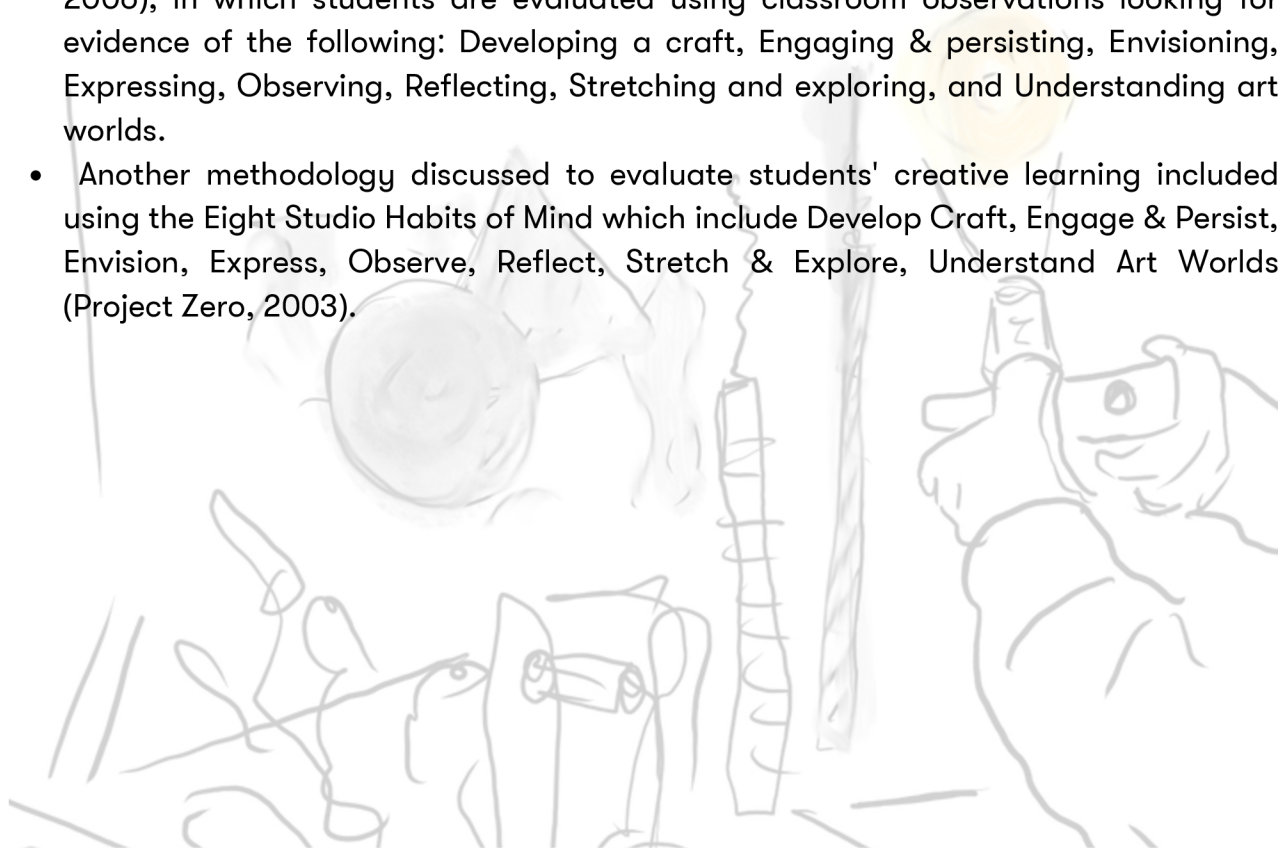
4. A need for new evaluation practices for capturing children's creativity

When asked about which current tools and methods they use for evaluation of BPS curriculum the teachers respond with a variety of different methods. Four out of the six teachers interviewed felt the evaluation tools currently being used in BPS classrooms, such as Teaching Strategies Gold (TS Gold) and Ages and Stages Assessment (ASQ), don't capture the student's creative learning and needs to be tweaked for younger age groups and to truly capture the complexity of the creative learning process. One teacher suggested that a rubric that truly captures and evaluates children's creative learning process should focus on the student's interaction with the materials and artistic processes, commenting:

"What I keep in mind when I am writing the children's progress reports is like 'Is the child able to connect and play with materials? Are they able to create?' "

Three teachers discussed alternate methods they had developed for evaluating and assessing student's creative learning journey, these included:

- Documenting children's learning processes using photos, videos, and notes, and collating these records as student portfolios. This method is similar to the pedagogical documentation strategy used in Reggio Emilia schools.
- Constructing a system where students can earn creative badges as a way that the students can identify their own learning goals and celebrate these when they accomplish them.
- Creating an assessment rubric modeled off the Studio Habits of Mind (Winner et al, 2006), in which students are evaluated using classroom observations looking for evidence of the following: Developing a craft, Engaging & persisting, Envisioning, Expressing, Observing, Reflecting, Stretching and exploring, and Understanding art worlds.
- Another methodology discussed to evaluate students' creative learning included using the Eight Studio Habits of Mind which include Develop Craft, Engage & Persist, Envision, Express, Observe, Reflect, Stretch & Explore, Understand Art Worlds (Project Zero, 2003).



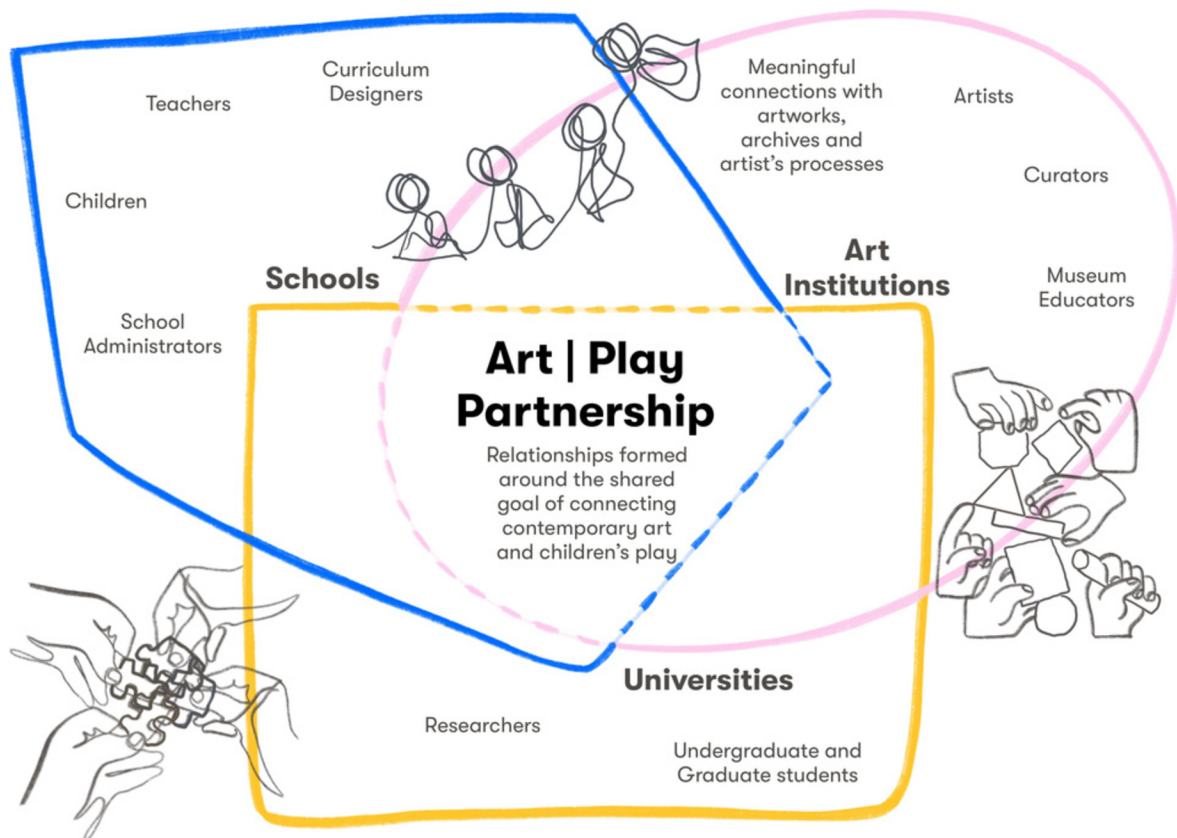


Image: Illustration of the Art | Play Partnership Model by Nanvi Jhala

5. Fostering partnerships between schools, artists, and cultural organizations

Art|Play worked to establish a network of educators, artists, and administrators committed to children’s equitable access to the arts. Partnerships formed between Project Zero, Harvard Graduate School of Education, BPS, and cultural organizations came together under the common goal of connecting contemporary art and children’s play. When asked about the importance of partnerships between schools, museums, and research institutions, four of the six teachers highlighted how partnerships with museums are crucial for the success of this project. Three key themes that emerged from the interviews around the importance of partnerships included: 1. They are crucial for children from different backgrounds; 2. They help children understand the value of art and have access to tools and resources for arts learning; and 3. They provide support, collaboration, and connection for students and educators that can lead to understanding the art world. One of the BPS curriculum designers commented on the significance of partnership as, “Collaboration and partnering is a way to really get more ideas on the table... I think that partnership is critical. I think that often teachers don't see our museum as a resource for what's happening in schools.”

Research Outputs

The contributions of this project are both theoretical and practical. In this section we intertwine these to share the research outputs of Art|Play.

Boston Public Schools' Curriculum

The primary outcome of this Critical Participatory Action Research project is the development of BPS' new Focus on 3s and Focus on 4s curriculums. Across both of these syllabuses, a total of 31 Art|Play activities were developed and implemented in classrooms, ensuring 4,088 3 and 4-year-old students had the opportunity to engage and learn through these activities. Each activity was designed across two parts, allowing children to have extended engagement with the materials, tools, and concepts. You can view these curriculums in their entirety here:

- Focus on 3s curriculum: <https://www.bpsearlylearning.org/focus-on-3s>
- Focus on 4s curriculum: <https://www.bpsearlylearning.org/focus-on-4s>

Downloadable Activity Guides and Instructional Videos

Art|Play also produced a series of instructional videos for teachers and activity guides for parents and caregivers relating to the following six Art|Play activities: Cardboard Construction, Sound Sculptures, Action Painting, Light + Shadow Sculptures, Nature Arrangements, and Nature Constructions. The Activity Guides are available in English, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Spanish and are available to download off the Art|Play Project Zero website: <https://pz.harvard.edu/projects/artplay>



Art | Play Professional Development Series

The Art | Play professional development series that was facilitated as part of this study contributed numerous benefits that both enhanced teaching practices and subsequently enriched student learning experiences in the classroom. By playing, making, and experiencing the material play activities themselves in the session, they were then able to encourage children's creative learning experiences confidently and in diverse ways in the classroom. The PD series emphasized the importance of play as a fundamental aspect of learning, helping educators understand how playful interactions foster cognitive, social, emotional, and embodied learning processes in young children.

Additionally, the program provided teachers with innovative and practical strategies to create engaging learning environments that reflect children's interests and cultural backgrounds. By collaborating with contemporary artists during the sessions, educators were able to develop a deeper understanding of artistic processes, allowing teachers to guide children in exploring their creativity in the classroom activities.

Project Zero's Art | Play website

The final key outputs of the study is the development of Project Zero's Art | Play website: <https://pz.harvard.edu/projects/artplay> This resource makes two significant practical contributions. First, it allows for the public dissemination of all research outputs via a free and open-source platform. Secondly, it allows for an international network of like-minded professionals to connect with the project, with the intent that this network will be able to be further cultivated and expanded in the future.





“Collaboration and partnering is a way to really get more ideas on the table when thinking about the education of our youngest citizens. I think that partnership is critical”

-Curriculum Designer at Boston Public Schools

Future Recommendations

To build on the successes of Art|Play, we have identified the following four recommendations for educators, administrators, and policy-makers. While the research team is engaged in serious conversation with colleagues who were a part of this first iteration of the Art|Play research project to explore options for strengthening and expanding work locally, in this section we highlight recommendations for the wider arts education community:

1. Deepen connections between artists, cultural organizations, and public schools.

As we found in our research, partnerships between public school teachers and staff, cultural organization leaders, and artists are a key to a variety of important benefits for all involved, but most critically for children. To achieve those benefits, resources must be made available to support:

- **More creative professional development for educators:** It is crucial to provide ongoing creative and hands-on learning professional development opportunities for teachers. Throughout this project, teachers expressed the desire to attend PDs that centered around art because they felt that those active, hands-on experiences made them better teachers for their students. Too much professional development for teachers is simply long days of moving from one session to another where they are being spoken at. Findings from Art|Play revealed that teachers want to create and actually find value and enjoyment from making and playing with art media, as well as having the opportunity to meet with, talk to, and learn from artists and like-minded educators.
- **Cultural organizations:** Local cultural organizations, from museums to performing arts centers to community arts centers are best situated to facilitate teacher and student engagement with artworks and artists, especially artists from diverse backgrounds. This is essential as we continue to diversify arts learning curricula within public schools. More artforms including dance, spoken word, and other experimental practices can also be included with the expertise and connections brought by these cultural organizations. While school department funding is crucial to supporting arts offerings in the regular school program, those funds, now hardly sufficient in any schools, will always be limited. Support for cultural organizations will allow them to provide these much needed additional dimensions to the arts and humanities offerings in schools.
- **Additional time, space, and materials for engaging students in creative arts learning in schools:** One of the common concerns that emerged from our teacher interviews was the lack of access to resources, such as time to facilitate activities and clean up, space in classrooms to create art, and access to materials for artmaking. Teachers cited the challenges for students to deep engagement in creative arts learning when these elements were not adequate.

2. Expand this partnership model to include families, parents, and caregivers.

We heard time and again, in interviews and especially in our collaborative dialogues with BPS staff, what we know from extensive research about the critical importance of including parents/caregivers and families in young children's learning and development. Expanding the CPAR model we used in this project could be an excellent step toward including these members of the larger learning community that surrounds, supports, and enhances the work that takes place in early years classrooms. In this process, it is essential to generate attractive and helpful resources and materials in multiple languages, as we have attempted to do in this project, for use by these stakeholders as they, in turn, support and enhance children's classroom learning at home and in the community.

3. Revise classroom assessment models to focus on children's creative learning.

Teachers identified the limitations of current assessment tools when it came to the evaluation of children's creative learning processes. In order to rectify this, outcomes of this project suggests a critical need to construct new evaluation and assessment models concerning the arts in early childhood. Two major ideas underlie this recommendation:

- The model of documentation utilized in this project, influenced by practices developed in preschools in Reggio Emilia, Italy and described in *Making learning visible: Children as individual and group learners* (2001), has significant potential for providing children, teachers, administrators, and families with powerful and visible evidence of both what children are producing and the processes through which they created those products. Documentation reveals the children's thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration. This information can be used to guide all further efforts to deepen and enrich children's learning experiences, especially their creative arts learning.
- Assessment of children's creative arts learning requires frameworks that are largely missing from most assessment paradigms utilized in public education. And yet there are powerful frameworks available and/or suitable for local adaptation, such as the work presented in *Studio Habits of Mind* (Winner et al, 2006), the *Five-Dimensional Model of Creativity* (Lucas, 2016), and PISA's *Creative Thinking Assessment framework* (OECD, 2019).

4. Explore opportunities to expand the Art|Play model to new grade levels and new urban school districts.

As discussed in the Literature Review of this report, the approaches utilized in Art|Play were based on studies of many previous efforts to infuse early childhood educational programs with meaningful access to the arts and creative learning opportunities. The experience of the project itself suggests the robust possibilities inherent in this model for adaptation in other settings, notably urban school districts, and, we speculate based on other experiences and research, at different grade levels with older students. We recognize the critical importance of respecting the specific cultures and contexts of other districts and communities and do not suggest that this model (specific partnerships, lessons, professional development plans, etc.) can be simply dropped into new locations. A critical assessment of this project should be undertaken by any district or even schools interested in this approach. But the research foundation for this work is robust and interested educators should certainly be supported to engage in a thoughtful analysis of the findings of the Art|Play project and the possibilities for implementing it appropriately, in full or in part, in their settings. We believe that the use of CPAR as a methodology for implementing and evaluating such programs, specifically to explore the relevance and possibility of play-based learning and the arts, is advisable, notably to ensure broad participation of as many stakeholders as possible. Early participation of this nature will go a long way toward the success of any subsequent implementation.

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