



Uncovering New Pathways with the Arts at Frog Hollow

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Atelierista

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My work at Frog Hollow as the *Atelierista*, (the *Reggio Emilia* school's term is akin to an Artist-in-Residence) began at the same time as the art studio was opening at FH's Satellite Daycare. With this new room coming to life, it seemed the perfect opportunity to begin with a series of conversations with educators about the arts with the intention to reflect on how the arts can be integrated into our work with children. We began these discussions considering the following questions:

- What is art? What could it be?
- How can the arts be used as a tool for inquiry?
- What do we take into consideration when working in the art studio?
- How do we balance and honour the process as well as the product?

As an artist working with children and educators, I notice that many adults can have a narrow vision of the arts. The imagery often comes directly from what we have seen on museum walls and rarely considers the process of art making, nor the importance of the art studio as a place of inquiry. Equally narrow is the vision many hold of what art can be with children. Usually, what comes to mind first as possibilities are images of materials that are marketed to parents and teachers as art activities. These kits of materials are typically sold in bright neon or primary colours and are made of inexpensive and/or poor quality materials that, in fact, limit the possibilities. Rather than proposing an inquiry for children to delve into, these activities are usually formulaic with the purpose of following pre-determined steps to arrive at a pre-determined result. It appears, the main purpose of these activities is to keep children occupied rather than to work together with children to build our collective knowledge.

As subjects of a capitalistic society, it is no wonder that art is viewed as something to be bought or consumed, whether we think about a Sotheby's art auction or an art kit from Crayola, both are tied to economy. In order to re-

conceptualize the “arts with children,” I invited educators to think about art as a springboard to inquire further into ideas, questions or theories that are already alive in the classroom. How can we use the arts to draw out more ideas and to dialogue together as a learning group? As opposed to the concept bringing in art activities as a way to keep children busy.

In discussions with educators about the arts, we arrived at the idea that it all comes back to what is our intention. If our intention is to keep children busy, then the arts are about consumption. However, if we think of the arts as a tool for going deeper and building knowledge together, the arts are a lived-experience that can allow us to create new pathways, perhaps even leading to new ways of thinking.

As my time in FH programs continued I observed projects emerging that allowed for a continuing evolution and exchange of ideas between children and educators alike. I will now elaborate on how I witnessed a specific project-*The City Map* unfold and take on a life of its own, bridging space and time. Thanks to the educators’ detailed documentation presented in the hallways of Frog Hollow, I was able to trace the first movements in this collaborative project between preschool and after-school. In speaking with Trish, the lead educator of this preschool, I got more of the backstory and understood that her initial intention was to bridge a connection between these two groups of children.

It all started when Trish noticed that the preschool materials from the morning were not being taken care of very well by some of the children who arrived hours later in the same space for after school care. She considered this problem and wondered if the afternoon children from Kidsworld were able to get to know the preschool children from the morning perhaps they might be more careful with the classroom projects and materials? However, this would be difficult and entail some *outside of the box thinking* because these children inhabited the space at completely different hours of the day, Preschool from 9am-1pm and Kidsworld from 3:30-5:30.

children in the life of the city of Vancouver. The maps created by school age children in the above mentioned project give us a wonderful window into how children experience the city. In turn, when the preschool children bring their play to these maps with trains, cars and even dinosaurs we hear the stories of how these children experience the city. Whether it is riding on the skytrain or being stuck in traffic jams children have so much to say about the city. Working with *Reggio's* concept of *pedagogy of listening*, combined with educator's thoughtful questions and documentation, children's voices can be heard and their ideas become visible to the larger community. To take this notion a step further, if we consider children as citizens of today and not just of the future, through the act of making their voices heard now, their ideas can begin to shape our community of today as well as our shared future.



Another project in a similar vein that I am very grateful for having the opportunity to work with Frog Hollow is the *Making Children Visible Mural and Garden* that opened in June 2018. This community project brought together ten unique groups, from toddlers to preschoolers, elementary and secondary students as well as FH seniors. Together, we created a site specific art piece that brought children's voices and ideas for the city into the public sphere.

Detail of *Making Children Visible Mural*, wooden blocks create by grade 6/7 students.

In addition to my time observing in the classroom and carrying out art explorations with children, I was present for a number of Learning Circle meetings between classroom educators and *Pedagogists* from Capilano University. In these meetings, I saw FH educators taking ownership of their project work while at the same time building confidence in sharing their work. The Learning Circles also provided a generative space that we could think together about projects and I would often offer some artistic extensions of the work. It is here in the emergent process of project work that I believe we need to provide further support to educators. When we are able to think together about projects, possibilities abound and ideas become contagious. In this way, educators do not feel so isolated and excitement for project work can be shared between educators and centres. It is here, in this collective space that we can also support children as *meaning-makers* and creators and uncover new pathways with the arts together.

A flexible city plan, conceived of and created by the children of Kidsworld for the preschoolers to explore and envision a new and dynamic city every day.

