Janis Power Thesis

by JANIS POWER

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"How can I increase the influence of the Reggio Emilia approach in our art area?"

Janis Power

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Supervised by: Dr. Annette J. Kearns

Ainm / *Name*: Janis Power

Bliain / *Year group*: Year 2

Uimhir mhic léinn / *Student number*: 19744599

Ábhar / *Subject*: Thesis

Léachtóir / Teagascóir: Dr. Annette J. Kearns

***Lecturer / Tutor*:**

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Declaration

I certify that this research, submitted for the degree of Master of Education, Maynooth University, is entirely my own work, has not been taken from the work of others and has not been submitted in any other university. The work of others, to an extent, has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work. I acknowledge that the use of Generative artificial intelligence tools is prohibited on the MEd (Research in Practice) programme and has not been used in this body of work.

Student name: Janis Power

Date: 12/09/2025

Abstract

This self-study action research explores 'How can I increase the influence of the Reggio Emilia approach in our art area?" Additionally, the research investigates 'what do I need to put in place to increase creativity in the art room?' and 'how can I live closer to my values regarding children's agency in the art area?' Articulating my values led to a realisation that I was a living contradiction. This realisation resulted in me utilising my values as a catalyst for change.

Kemmis and McTaggart's action research cycle was applied to two research cycles. Data was gathered through my reflective journal, questionnaires, photography, anecdotal observations, dialogue with critical friends and a semi-structured interview with my manager. Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic data analysis supported the generation of codes and themes, leading to the naming of the overall findings. Rigour and validation was supported through triangulation of the data as well as discussion with my critical friends and adopting my values as standards of judgment.

Three findings emerged. Firstly, children's agency and creativity increased when physical barriers were removed, resources were accessible and open-ended materials were added to the space. Secondly, it was found that documentation involves reflection, collaboration and a relational approach to co-creation. Lastly, themes emerged that highlighted adapting the Reggio Emilia approach to an Irish setting requires contextualisation, collaboration and ongoing reflection.

This self-study action research reflects how attempting to live to one's own values can improve practice and contribute to the creation of a living theory. Although there are limitations such as the small scale of the study and it being deeply personal, there are transferable elements including evidence of utilising values to create change and the implementation of a different approach to early childhood education.

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I want to extend my sincere thanks to my supervisor Annette for all of your support, not just during this Master's but throughout the undergraduate degree also. You really did keep me focused when my head was on a pivot and I didn't know what direction I was going. I hope to use and share my knowledge for many years to support children to the best of my ability. As you once said, "once you know better, you do better". This line will forever guide my practice.

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To my Friends, I know I say handle is my middle name, but I really could not have got through this without you to keep me company.

Darragh and Carly, I know you are teenagers now and don't really need me much anymore, but I honestly could not *be* any more excited to drop you and collect you places rather than sitting at a laptop! I love you loads, and hope all of the stress over the last few months has not detered you from following your dreams.

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List of Abbreviations

AR: Action Research

CF: Critical Friend

DES: Department of Education and Skills

ECE: Early Childhood Education

EECERA: European Early Childhood Education Research Association

ERA: Experience, Reflection and Action

NAEYC: National Association for the Education of Young Children

NCCA: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

REA: Reggio Emilia Approach

SSAR: Self-Study Action Research

UNCRC: United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1: Introduction

This thesis documents my self-study action research (SSAR) journey. While the overall purpose was to answer the research question 'How can I increase the influence of the Reggio Emilia approach in our art area?' there were many unexpected moments of personal learning along the way. This opening chapter will describe the aims of this research, the rationale behind my research question and my educational values. An overview of the context of the research setting will also be provided, as well as a brief description of the research cycles and ethical considerations. A short summary of each chapter will conclude.

1.2: Context

This SSAR took place in a sessional only early childhood education (ECE) setting in the south of Dublin. The setting is situated in an area considered very disadvantaged and is part of a family centre. This centre provides parenting supports as well as two preschool sessions, one morning and one afternoon, for children aged 2 years 8 months up to 6 years old. The setting and educators work closely with many outside agencies, including TUSLA[1], the local public health nurses and various early intervention therapists. Many of the children who attend the setting require additional support, consequently, we have a low ratio of four educators to a class of twenty-two children in the morning and fifteen children in the afternoon. My role within the setting is as an early year's educator alongside the three other educators and a manager. All educators hold degrees in early childhood education and utilise a trauma informed approach in their teaching practices.

1.3: Background

When I finished my undergraduate degree in early childhood teaching and learning in 2022, I knew my educational journey would not end there. At that time, I had managed a community full day care setting for five years. Over those years there had been many new regulations, funding changes and a pandemic and adjusting to the ever-changing landscape of ECE had led to me feel less and less involved with actual children. I felt burned out, an issue that many educators encounter at some time in their careers (Ghanizadeh and Jahedizadeh, 2015). I wanted to get back to working 'on the floor' with young children as this is where my true passion lies. Therefore, I moved workplace to the setting where this

research eventually took place. Many tried to convince me it was not a great move for my career, viewing a management role as a more superior position. At the time I could not quite explain why I knew in my heart it was the right thing to do. Last August, at the outset of this master's programme, we were encouraged to interrogate our values. It was in the process of reflecting, refining and articulating my values that I could finally understand why I felt working directly with children is the most important role in the world and the rationale for the SSAR emerged.

1.4: Rationale

When beginning research that is based upon your own practice it is crucial to understand what is important to you as an educator and interrogate your ontological and epistemological values (Glenn, et al., 2023). They state ontological values refer to the researcher's beliefs regarding reality, how relationships are formed and connections created, while epistemological values refer to the creation of knowledge and how we know what we know (Glenn et al., 2023). By articulating my values, although at the time felt like a simple requirement that needed to be completed, I was able to create the foundations of this SSAR. With my values at the forefront of my mind, I began to complete a reflective journal. On the opening page of this journal, I wrote the following values statement:

> *"I value a slow, relational pedagogy. I value the relationships I build with the children, their families and my colleagues. I believe children are agentic, capable beings that deserve teachers who recognise these capabilities and an environment that supports them to achieve their full potential."* (Reflective Journal, 12/11/2025)

Through utilising my reflective journal, I aimed to understand how I can improve my practice to live closer to my values (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006) and highlight any areas that I feel I do really well and should therefore be celebrated (McDonagh et al., 2019). I considered daily issues and interactions through reflective models such as Brookfield's (2017) four lenses reflective model, Schon's (1983) reflection-in-action and on-action model and Jaspers' (2013) Experience, Reflection and Action (ERA) model. It was soon evident there was an area of practice where there was an issue, namely access to the art room. I could see I was not living to my values, or as Whitehead (2006) states, I was a living contradiction as children's agency was extremely limited in this space.

A further issue also became apparent; the setting had a plan to attempt to be more inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach (REA). However, at this time, neither I nor my colleagues knew much about the approach. To address these issues and improve my practice I finalised my research questions with the help of my supervisor and began planning this SSAR. The main question this research addresses is 'How can I increase the influence of the Reggio Emilia approach in our art area'? There are two additional and complimentary questions I wished to address. These are 'what do I need to put in place to increase creativity in the art room?' and 'how can I live closer to my values regarding children's agency in the art area?'.

1.5: Chapter overview

There are five chapters in this thesis, including this introductory chapter. Chapter two, the literature review, details an in-depth analysis of the pertinent literature associated with the research question. An overall analysis of the REA is discussed. Following this, an analysis of the literature regarding art and creativity in ECE is presented. The power of documentation concludes the literature review. Chapter three discusses the methodologies used for this SSAR. It includes an overview of research paradigms and the rationale for choosing SSAR as the research paradigm in this project. The design of the research is then outlined, including the planned research cycles and interventions. Data collection methods are discussed, followed by an explanation of how the data was analysed. Ethical considerations and the limitations of the research conclude this chapter.

Chapter four, data analysis and findings, introduces how I used my values as a catalyst for change. The themes that emerged from the data analysis are then presented with critical reflections interwoven throughout. Chapter five, findings and conclusion, draws this SSAR to a close. The findings that emerged from the data are presented, followed by an overall reflection on the SSAR process and how my practice has changed. The final sections to conclude the SSAR are my claim to knowledge, the limitations of this SSAR and how I intend to disseminate this research.

1.6: Conclusion

The objective of this chapter was to introduce you, the reader, to the content of my SSAR thesis. The context of the setting in which this research took place is outlined, followed by a brief introduction to the background information that led to me continuing my educational

journey. The rationale behind this research was then outlined, my values were articulated and the foundation for my research question was established. A brief overview of each chapter was then provided to assist in navigating the document.

Chapter 2: Literature review

2.1: Introduction

A literature review involves exploring current knowledge, information, theory, practice and gaps in each area regarding a particular topic (Leite et al., 2019). This chapter will explore current literature from a variety of sources related to my main research question 'How can I increase the influence of the REA in our art area?' and the sub questions 'What do I need to put in place to increase creativity in the art room?' and 'How can I live closer to my values regarding children's agency in the art area?'. These research questions require an exploration of literature relating to the REA, art and creativity in early childhood education, children's agency and documentation which is documented in this chapter.

2.2: The Reggio Emilia Approach

The REA emerged after World War 2 (Smidt, 2013). It evolved because parents in the locality had lived under a dictatorship and wanted to reimagine education as a democratic right (Rinaldi, 2005; Moss, 2016). This unique context shaped their educational approach by committing to community participation, a rejection of authoritarianism and a deep sense of social justice (Moss, 2016). Malaguzzi, an educational philosopher of the time, heard about the approach to education that was developing in Reggio Emilia and became involved (Smidt, 2013). His pedagogical leadership was vital as they attempted to translate the cultural approach to education into a defined philosophy that placed children at the centre, as holders of rights and deserving of meaningful early education (Smidt, 2013; Gandini, 2012a).

Despite the popularity of the approach, Emerson and Linder (2021) caution against romanticising the story of its origins. Both Edwards (2002) and New (2007) argued that the conditions that led to the development of the educational approach are not easily replicated in other cultural situations, and attempting to do so can obscure the approach's cultural specificity (Manera, 2022). For instance, Scheinfeld, Haigh and Scheinfeld (2008) established that attempting to apply the REA in urban U.S. settings required educators to reconceptualise the approach due to the different socio-economic conditions. Despite this research being almost twenty years old, more recent research carried out by Giaminutti and Merewether's (2023) concurs with this perspective. They concluded that the aesthetic elements of the REA are embedded in Italy's broader cultural background, meaning the replication of the approach in other cultural contexts appears superficial unless sensitively

adapted. By recognising this, educators recognise the importance of interpreting the approach in ways that are authentic to local contexts while remaining true to its philosophical roots (Moss, 2016). Having historically situated the approach and cautioning against its blind replication, the philosophical and theoretical foundations need to be considered to fully understand the approach to ECE.

2.2.1: Philosophical and theoretical foundations

According to Moss (2012) the approach utilises a relational epistemology. Learning is seen as constructed through social interactions and expressed through the 'hundred languages' that Malaguzzi believed all children held (Smidt, 2013). The approach aligns with both constructivist and social-cultural theories and is often referred to as being connected to the work of Vygotsky, Bruner and Dewey (Dodd-Nufrio, 2011; Stone, 2012). As the REA is constantly evolving through dialogue and reflection there is a resistance, however, to completely align it solely with these theories (Emerson and Linder, 2021; Moss, 2016; Rinaldi, 2005).

New (2007) suggests the use of cultural activity theory to support the notion that the approach is inseparable from the social and cultural context in which it evolved. Socio-material and posthuman theories and philosophies are used by Swann (2008) in an attempt to explain how the materials and the environment, as well as the relationships, support the learning that occurs in the schools of Reggio Emilia. By applying a post humanist lens, Albin-Clark (2024) critiques the belief that the REA is truly progressive, suggesting that power inequalities can be produced unless reimagined through digital and inclusive pedagogies.

Similarly, Rigney and Kelly (2023) question the neutrality of the philosophy, claiming that as a culturally responsive pedagogical approach, it must be appropriately interpreted to consider indigenous contexts. However, Dodd-Nufrio (2011) advises against attempting to align the approach with western educational theories as this may simplify the organic nature of its development. Therefore, while the approach offers a theoretical foundation for other cultures and contexts to apply, its true strength lies in the ability to adapt the philosophy rather than blindly following it as if it were a set of guidelines (Chicken, 2023).

2.2.2: Key pedagogical principles

As literature suggests, the approach is not to be followed like a set of guidelines or a checklist to be fulfilled. Consequently, there lacks a consistent set of principles attached to the approach (Moss, 2016; Chicken, 2023). Upon review of the literature, however, there are several key principles that are emphasised throughout (Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1: Principles of the Reggio Emilia approach

These principles are interconnected and not standalone curriculum goals (Hendrick, 1997; Chicken, 2023). An overview of the principles is provided in this section to highlight how they are connected, while others that relate to the research questions are discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

The image of the child and the one hundred languages

The image of the child underpins the entire REA. Malaguzzi viewed children as capable and competent, believing the held rights to be active participants in their own learning (Hawins, 2012). This principle highlights children's agency in their play and creativity within the atelier. The atelier is a space where children's hundred languages are thought to be most supported (Rinaldi, 2006; Wurm, 2005). The metaphor of the 'hundred languages' refers to the multiple ways in which children express themselves, such as linguistically, musically and artistically to name a few (Rinaldi, 2006; Vecchi, 2010). By supporting children's many modes of expression, educators support their thinking processes and individuality (Strong-Wilson and Ellis, 2007).

Documentation and a pedagogy of listening

Pedagogical documentation is a crucial element of the curriculum and the REA (Stone, 2012). Boyd and Bath (2017) claim professional development is required to effectively create pedagogical documentation. They state there is a need to understand the power relations between educators and the children the teach so that they can effectively, and more importantly meaningfully, document the children's ideas. Collaboration, in documentation as well as the everyday running of the schools of Reggio Emilia, is a crucial element of the approach's philosophy rooted in the values and its post-war origins (Rinaldi, 2006). This collaborative ethos supports educators to engage in critical, ongoing reflection with each other and individually, and therefore, practice is seen as constantly improving (Barchi and Giudici, 2011).

Family and community involvement

Collaborative relationships between children, their families, the educators and the wider community is integral to the learning that occurs in Reggio Emilia (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005). Families are considered active participants in curriculum design, contributing knowledge, perspectives and cultural values (Gandini, 2012b; Wurm, 2005). Rinaldi (2006) states families are viewed as partners in their children's learning, and engagement and involvement in the ECE settings of Reggio Emilia is highly valued.

An emergent curriculum and progettazione

The emergent curriculum is responsive to the individual needs and interests of the children as well as family and community events (Biermeier, 2015). However, it must be noted that the curriculum of Reggio Emilia is not simply emergent in nature as educators also use a project approach, or progettazione (Moss, 2012). The progettazione involves extending inquiry driven explorations connected to the observed interests of the children (Bentley, 2013; Martalock, 2012). While related to the project approach as developed by Katz and Chard (2000), the interpretation by Reggio Emilia educators emphasises the co-construction, aesthetics and relational aspects of the learning that occurs (Martalock, 2012; Dodd-Nufrio, 2011). Unlike prescriptive curriculum approaches, the progettazione in Reggio Emilia is reflective, participatory and embraces uncertainty (Rinaldi, 2005). However, Bentley (2013) warns that emergent curricula such as the curriculum of Reggio Emilia can be misinterpreted, claiming the approach could be viewed as having a lack of structure. In

addition, teachers could be viewed as passive educators rather than co-researchers that guide the learning (Wurm, 2005).

Educator as co-researchers

To support the development of the curriculum observation, documentation and dialogue between pedagogistas, atelieristas and educators, all viewed as co-researchers alongside the children, is crucial (Barchi and Giudici, 2011; Moss, 2016). The role of pedagogistas within Reggio Emilia settings involves providing support to educators and atelieristas to interpreting the documentation and learning that occurs (Manera, 2022; Cagliari et al., 2012). They also support the development of the curriculum plans alongside their colleagues. The atelierista is a dedicated artist who works within the settings in the atelier (Vecchi, 2010, Rinaldi, 2005). They are not necessarily teachers and often do not have an educational background. The atelierista is supported by the pedagogistas and educators within the setting to document the learning.

While pedagogistas and educators work with every age group, atelieristas only work with the older age group in the 'scuole dell'infanzia', or preschool due to the high costs of employing someone to fill the role (Vecchi, 2010). The educators in their various roles work in collaboration with each other. They are viewed as more than "merely a transmitter of knowledge and culture" but as "powerful teacher(s), the only kind of teacher(s) suitable for our equally powerful child" (Rinaldi, 2006:125). Therefore, collaborative practice extends beyond the educators and includes the children. The relationship between educator and child involves co-creation and children are views as co-protagonists in building knowledge and researching ideas (Rinaldi, 2006).

The environment as the third teacher

The environment as the 'third teacher' is a central principle in the REA, emphasising that the physical space itself communicates values, provokes inquiry and supports collaboration (Gandini, 2012c). Manera (2022) contends the learning spaces should be aesthetically pleasing, intentionally arranged and encourage collaboration and curiosity among the children. Likewise, Tarr (2001) asserts that attention needs to be given to lighting, materials and what is on display to avoid any 'visual clutter' in the spaces as environments are in constant evolution, responding to the needs and interests of the children (Stone, 2012; Barchi

and Giudici, 2011). Significantly, spaces should be viewed as supporting the learning of the children, hence the contention that they act as 'third teachers' (Strong-Wilson and Ellis, 2007; Rinaldi, 2006). A distinct space and principle within the REA is the atelier. As the research question is focused on the influence of the approach in our art area, literature regarding the atelier requires a more in-depth review.

2.2.3: The atelier

The atelier is a space that supports children to express themselves using their 'hundred languages' (Gandini, 2012c). Vecchi (2010) claims Malaguzzi introduced the atelier space to support his vision of an approach to children's education that valued aesthetics, beauty and wonder as much as the development of cognitive functions. He believed to support the education of aesthetics children needed access to a trained artist in residence, or atelierista, to work alongside the traditional educators (Smidt, 2013). The unique inclusion of the atelierista solidified the approaches commitment to supporting creativity. The atelier is resourced with open-ended materials and loose parts which are used to provoke interest, curiosity, experimentation and collaboration (Strong-Wilson and Ellis, 2007; Daly et al., 2015). Children's work and the resources are displayed to create visual and tactile stimulation (Manera, 2022).

As a distinct space, it is not to be viewed as an 'art room', but rather a space for children to experiment, create and explore ways to represent their ideas in multiple ways (Vecchi, 2010). Internationally, the use of the atelier and having an atelierista as part of the team of educators is admired and sometimes replicated, but their use outside of Reggio Emilia has faced many challenges. In some cases, the atelier has become a space focused on the creation of adult directed products which undermines its role as a space for creative exploration (Giamminuti and Merewether, 2022). This does not mean that other countries and contexts should not attempt to introduce an atelier. In fact, research carried out in Canada by Strong-Wilson and Ellis (2007) concluded that in settings inspired by the REA where an atelierista was introduced to work alongside educators, projects and interests were sustained over a longer period of time. Additionally in an Irish context, Hayes et al., (2017) conducted research with settings that incorporated an 'artist in residence'. They found that educator's knowledge regarding the educational potential of the arts increased, and overall practice was improved. With this in mind, their approach highlighted how the principle of the atelier, and the role of the atelierista, can be incorporated effectively outside of Reggio Emilia.

2.2.4: Connections to Aistear and Siolta

As cultural translation of the approach is essential (Wurm, 2005), it is necessary to connect the approach to the Irish context. Aistear is the Irish curriculum framework for young children from birth to six years of age (NCCA, 2024), while Síolta is the quality framework for ECE settings in Ireland (DES, 2017). Both frameworks have several foundational principles that emphasise child-centred practice and align with the REA, such as the view of children as being competent, active learners capable of constructing their own learning. Additionally, the frameworks support the implementation of an emergent curriculum and a carefully planned environment that is responsive to children's needs and emerging interests. The importance of reflective practice and collaboration between educators, families and communities is central to both frameworks and the REA. While Aistear and Síolta lack a distinct focus on the aesthetics of the environment, the frameworks do emphasise inclusive practices and holistic development. These connections between the frameworks and the principles of the REA support its meaningful adaptation within Irish ECE contexts (Chicken, 2023; NCCA, 2024; DES, 2017). Additionally, a pathway is opened for art and creativity to be explored in relation to Irish ECE settings.

2.3: Art and Creativity in Early Childhood Education

Art and creativity play a central role in ECE as forms of expression, methods for inquiry and an extension to children's imagination. Literature suggests the arts are also important as they support children's holistic development and provide ways of meaning-making (Maners, 2022; Pelo, 2017; Richards and Terrini, 2022). Art should not be viewed as an isolated activity or a frivolous way to pass time but rather a language, a way of expressing thoughts and feelings, and a method of communication woven into everyday practice (Vecchi, 2010). Despite the rich potential of an arts-based approach to ECE (Hayes et al., 2017), creative arts practices remain marginalised in favour of more structured learning activities (Craft et al., 2012).

Richards and Terrini (2022) claim adult directed activities undermine children's creative exploration. They contend these are usually pursued to enable educators easily link learning to standardised curriculum outcomes, a practice that is often referred to as 'schoolification' (Brogaard Clausen, 2015). The term 'schoolification' refers to the premature introduction of academic pressures in early childhood (Brogaard Clausen, 2015), often at the expense of time spent on artistic and creative play (Smyth, 2016). Building on

this, Biermeier (2015) asserts extended time is needed for creative exploration, providing children with opportunities to take creative risks (Bentley, 2013), where they feel they have the time to fail and try again. There are many theories that consider children's learning and creativity which will be discussed in the following section.

2.3.1: Philosophical and Theoretical Foundations of Art and Creativity in ECE

While Piaget's constructivist theory does not focus on art and creativity, there is a focus on children's active, self-initiated learning which connects to children's artistic development (Aslanian, 2018). Likewise, the work of Froebel does not explicitly focus on the creation of art, but his 'gifts' highlight the power of aesthetic materials and how they can support thoughtful exploration (Bruce, 2012). There are, however, more relevant theoretical perspectives on art and creativity in ECE that emphasise their role in communication, idea creation and social participation. Lindqvist (2003) claims that Vygotsky's sociocultural theory supports the notion that creativity is not a separate cognitive function. Instead, creativity is integrated into all cognitive functions and supported through relational, social interactions. Vygotsky believed imagination was deeply connected to lived experiences that are then nurtured through play and dialogue (Vygotsky, 2004; Lindqvist, 2003). Therefore, art is viewed as more than just an activity to be carried out, it is a method which supports children to engage with the world around them.

This viewpoint contrasts with those who view creativity as a trait possessed only by those that are deemed 'gifted' (Fielding et al., 2023; Chappell, et al., 2016). Educators who think of creativity as something only possessed by the chosen few can possibly limit children's exploration as well as their own creative endeavours (Wickett, 2022). The educational philosophy of Dewey positions art as an experiential and relational process where learning occurs through doing, sensing and reflecting (Lindsay, 2015). This belief also connects to the idea that creativity is for everyone rather than those viewed as gifted (Pelo, 2017). Purnell et al. (2007) highlight the influence of Dewey's philosophy on environments, calling for spaces that support active learning and are aesthetically pleasing.

2.3.2: Arts and Creativity Policies in Irish ECE

Government policy in Ireland regarding the arts and creativity in educational settings has evolved from the first published report by the Arts Council in 1978. Although, ECE is not mentioned in the document, unsurprising since there was no formal recognition of ECE until

the late 1990's (Hayes, 2007). This document was, however, the first to acknowledge the importance of the arts in an educational context. Since then, policy has developed to not only consider the arts in ECE, but to develop a set of principles specifically for this distinct developmental stage. The Creative Youth Plan 2023-2027 committed to 'a renewed focus on supporting engagement in Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare' (Government of Ireland, 2023:7).

In June 2025, the Government of Ireland launched the 'Principles for Engaging in the Arts: A Guide for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare Settings'. Although released after this SSAR was completed, it is encouraging to see that the ECE sector now has its own set of principles to guide artistic practice. While these frameworks and strategies outline strong aspirations for the arts and creativity in ECE, there is a consistent gap between policy intent and everyday practice. Research points to constraints such as funding limitations, space availability and pressure to meet measurable outcomes as key barriers to fully realising these aspirations (Hayes et al., 2017). Consequently, although policy development appears to be going in the right direction, the implementation of these policies and strategies may be difficult to achieve.

2.4: Agency in ECE

Agency is seen as essential for creativity to flourish (Vecchi, 2010), therefore, to support artistic and creative development children's agency needs to be supported by settings and educators. As part of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) Article 12 states children have the right to have their opinions heard regarding all matters that directly affect them (United Nations, 1989). However, Lundy (2007) claims there is a level of ambiguity in the education sector about what this entails. She goes on the claim that common phrases such as 'the voice of the child' and 'the right to be heard' do not fully convey the extent to which children's opinions about their own lives should be listened to. To fully implement the Article, children are dependent on adults to not only understand the importance of it but to commit to complying with it to the best of their ability.

However, Kilkelly et al. (2004) claim there are often concerns regarding how much weight should be given to the opinions of children. For instance, adults often believe children lack the capacity to make decisions about their own lives. Moreover, it is often considered within the school environment that sharing control with the children can lead to an

undermining and loss of the adults perceived authority and control. Additionally, those working in an educational setting often feel their time should be spent on teaching subjects rather than worrying about compliance with the Article. There is a misunderstanding regarding the Article that further hampers its implementation, namely, that people do not understand that it is a legal obligation and applies to all decisions in educational settings that directly affect the children (Lundy, 2007).

Hart and Brando (2018) agree that there are several different perspectives regarding children's rights, agency and perceived freedom, however, they conclude that there is a need for balance when attempting to afford children as much freedom as possible. They call for the application of the capability approach proposed by Sen (2004) combined with a rights-based approach to better support the children's well-being. In ECE practice, this approach requires educators to balance the children's agentic decisions with what their abilities and needs. For example, a child may want to climb to the top of the climbing frame and jump off. The educator, ultimately, will support this decision while considering the child's ability to do it safely.

For Sen's (2004) capability approach to work in practice, educators need to have a good relationship with the children the teach. Agency in early childhood has been conceptualised as a relational process that emerges through interactions, environment, and participation rather than as an individual trait (Rinaldi, 2005). This perspective recognises that agency is constructed in the interplay between children, peers, educators, and materials, aligning with the Reggio Emilia pedagogy of listening. However, educators attempting to support children's agency often face similar constraints as those aiming to support their artistic and creative endeavours, such as limited time and pressure to meet measurable outcomes (Emerson and Linder, 2021). To counteract these constraints, pedagogical documentation that can also be used to support measurable outcomes can be co-created between educators, children and families (Blaisdell et al., 2022), It is believed this joint responsibility in the settings of Reggio Emilia supports children's agency, positions them as capable individuals and supports a sense of belonging (Albin-Clark, 2024).

2.4.1: A balanced approach

In practice, agency requires balance between children's freedom and the day-to-day decisions that educators must make (Amani and Fussy, 2023). Achieving a balance between

adult directed activities and child led, agentic play and creativity has been a cause for concern in ECE for many years (Emerson and Linder, 2021). While Aistear notes children are capable, active learners, there is also a recognition that a part of the role of educators is to create experiences that extend children's learning (NCCA, 2024).

The complex interplay between agency and structure can be understood through the combination of Halstead's (1996) work regarding liberal values and Giddens' (1984) structuration theory, despite these concepts not necessarily being focused on children or ECE. While Halstead's liberal values concept emphasises autonomy, this work also highlights the need for balance between individual freedom and the need for guidance and structure for the good of the group. Giddens' structuration theory supports understanding regarding the duality of structure and agency. The theory suggests structure influences agency, and likewise, agency influences structures.

In the context of ECE, the structures in place such as the routines, rules and layout of the environment influences the children's agency. Likewise, children's agency such as their ability to make choices and have autonomy over their play shapes the structure of the classroom and flow of the day. The key message from both approaches is the need for balance and a need for what could be considered the educator's application of phronesis. Phronesis, according to Burbules (2019), is one's own practical wisdom, their ability to make informed decisions and deliberate situations where they combine their own values with the needs of the group.

While children need structure to their day and rules or expectations for the good of the group, they also need autonomy over their play. This autonomy allows children to follow their interests and self-direct their learning. Educators need to constantly apply a balance between these needs and apply phronesis to develop their own *in the moment* decision making. According to Greene (1984) reflection can support educators to pause a moment and remove themselves from the 'dailyness' that they are often caught up in. By taking a moment to ask themselves if there is a balance between educator directed activities and children's agency, educators are indirectly upholding the rights of children. To support this practice, educators utilise their documentation to reflect and understand if this is being achieved (Rinaldi, 2006). This will be further explored in the following section.

2.5: Documentation in Early Childhood Education

Educators, according to Wert (2023) and Blaisdell et al. (2022), often make the final decision, and in doing so, rarely include children's choices in their documentation, limiting their agency. In certain ECE contexts, such as the current system in England, policies have poised documentation as a form of data for educator accountability rather than inquiry driven (Albin-Clarke, 2020). In contexts such as this, educators often create documentation for the purposes of compliance with regulations (Alnervik, 2018; Elden and Aras, 2024, Albin-Clark, 2020).

Harcourt and Jones (2016) state that completing huge amounts of documentation for the surface level purpose of compliance neglects educator's professional abilities to document in meaningful ways. However, McAfee and Leong (2002) warn there are times when standardised documentation is needed, particularly when trying to access targeted supports for children. Therefore, although much of the literature claims traditional methods of documenting learning are redundant, this point suggests there is still a place for these forms of assessments, and they should not be discounted.

In the context of Irish ECE, policies and regulations do not explicitly require any form of pedagogical documentation. However, the documents refer to the need to create individual child records that support learning and development, implying some form of learning observation is expected. Aistear (NCCA, 2024) and Síolta (DES, 2017) both reference documentation as a tool for planning, assessment, and communication with families, yet neither framework offers clear guidance on the pedagogical purposes of documentation. This absence of explicit direction risks the practice defaulting to compliance-based recording rather than reflective, collaborative inquiry (Harcourt and Jones, 2016).

Formative assessment methods stand in opposition to traditional methods in that they are viewed as assessment *for* learning rather than assessment *of* learning (Rinadli, 2006). This process of meaningful documentation is complex, and involves multiple methods that often require continuous evaluation, interpretation and reflection (Azevedo et al., 2022; Sands and Lee, 2024). Methods include learning stories which are viewed as being a strengths-based approach to documentation and that require educators to utilise a relational

lens (Sands and Lee, 2024). However, this method loses meaning when it is not used consistently or analysed to inform future learning opportunities (Elden and Aras, 2024).

Blaisdell et al. (2022) claim narrative forms of documentation can often romanticise experiences by introducing educator's biases and captioning only positive learning dispositions while excluding children's struggles. Therefore, for this method of documentation to be truly meaningful educators need to complete them on a regular basis and avoid the superficial *show and tell* format that often occurs (Harcourt and Jones, 2016; Wien, 2011). In addition, research also highlights that workload pressures and limited non-contact time are major barriers to maintaining the regularity and depth needed for learning stories to inform curriculum planning (Boyd and Bath, 2017; Mages, 2016).

2.5.1: Pedagogical documentation

In opposition of compliance related records, pedagogical documentation is positioned as a shared experience (Rinaldi, 2006; Dahlberg, 2012). For pedagogical approaches such as Reggio Emilia, evaluation becomes meaningful through a sharing of documentation between educators, children and their families (Azevedo et al., 2022). This approach is believed to make learning visible, guide curriculum planning and encourage reflective practices (Dahlberg et al., 1999; Rinaldi, 2006; Wien, 2011). To use documentation as a pedagogical strategy, the documentation is viewed as co-created by educators and children (Rinaldi, 2006). However, Liljestrand and Hammarberg (2017) suggest there can be an uneven distribution of power regarding what to document and how to display it.

Among educators there can also be a power struggle. In her book McMonagle (2024) illustrates team members can lack confidence in their abilities to document, while others are not given the time to complete their documentation to the best of their ability. This supports Elden and Aras' (2024) finding regarding pedagogical documentation. They highlighted the documentation of projects was not always a priority, rather the focus was often placed on measurable outcomes. Creating pedagogical documentation is a collaborative process and involves carefully recording moments from day-to-day practice that are then interpreted to make learning visible (Rinaldi, 2006).

The REA views pedagogical documentation and a pedagogy of listening as inseparable (Rinaldi, 2012). The combination of both supports the creation of the

'progettazione' and honours 'the hundred languages' that children hold (Moss, 2012; Rinaldi, 2006). Displays and documentation panels are created and intentionally placed to provoke discussion and extend ideas as opposed to simply decorating the walls (Alnervik, 2018; Liljestrand and Hammarberg, 2017). According to Wien (2011), those attempting to implement Reggio inspired documentation often underestimate how different this is from other traditional methods. There is often a struggle to move from descriptive narrations alongside beautiful collages of children's art and photographs to generating hypotheses regarding the thinking that is occurring. If progettazione is to be informed by documentation, it must be shared and discussed with children on a regular basis (Martalock, 2012).

2.5.2: Sharing and reflecting on documentation

By carefully selecting images and pieces of children's work, then adding captions of children's words or observed actions and displaying them in a thoughtful and aesthetic manner, pedagogical documentation is thought to come to life (Wien, 2011; Vecchi, 2010). When documentation becomes this meaningful, not only is children's agency and creativity supported, reflective practice among educators and partnerships with families are also strengthened (McNally and Slutsky, 2017; Strong-Wilson and Ellis, 2007). Floor books as a method of documentation are a useful tool for reflecting alongside children. They provide an accessible and tangible document holding collective moments that children can repeatedly visit (McNally and Slutsky, 2017). By annotating the floor book over time with the words of the children, educators and children co-create the floor book (Strong-Wilson and Ellis, 2007).

By supporting children to select images to go into the floor book, educators redistribute the power and apply a pedagogy of listening to their practice (Rinaldi, 2005). Floor books, alongside documentation panels, are useful to share children's work and ideas with families. West (2018) recognises that parents and families are partners in their children's learning. However, this research demonstrated it is not always possible for parents to visit settings and have time to linger over documentation. To counteract this, the educators in West's (2018) article utilised QR codes to share the documentation digitally. This approach was seen as a cost effective, timely method that provided a simple way for children to share their work with those they love.

2.6 Conclusion

This literature review has explored the key topics and concepts relevant to my SSAR. The REA was examined, including the philosophical and theoretical foundations, pedagogical principles and the atelier. The approach was then connected to the Irish frameworks of Aistear and Siolta, therefore grounding Reggio inspired practice in this cultural context. The literature review then explored art and creativity, focusing on theories that inform creative practice followed by an exploration of policies that shape art and creativity in ECE in Ireland. Children's agency was then considered, highlighting the need for balance between children's autonomy and structure to support meaningful participation. An exploration of documentation concluded this chapter. Pedagogical documentation was the focus of this section, discussing how learning can be made visible. The analysis of this literature shapes the methodology described in the following chapter.

Chapter 3: Methodologies

3.1: Introduction

This chapter outlines and justifies the methodology used in this SSAR that will help me to answer the question 'how can I increase the influence of the REA in our art area?'. I begin by discussing methodological approaches to research followed by the purpose and aim of the study. An outline of the research design is then provided, including the research framework, and an overview of the plans for each cycle. I explain the different data collection methods used throughout the study, including my reflective journal, questionnaires, photography, anecdotal observations, dialogue with critical friends and a semi-structured interview with my manager. Data analysis is then discussed, including the process of thematic analysis and how ensuring the validity and rigour of the data will be addressed. Ethical considerations are then outlined, including the need for consent and assent, power imbalances, how confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained and the appropriate storage of the data. This chapter will conclude with a discussion regarding the limitations of the research.

3.2: Research paradigms

According to Preston (2008), the term paradigm was first used by Kuhn in 1959 and subsequently published in his book 'The Structure of Scientific Revolutions' in 1962. He claimed scientists operate in different scientific worlds and therefore generate ideas that are relevant to their own field of interest. Glenn et al. (2023) claim there are multiple research paradigms, however, they focus on the positivist paradigm, interpretivist paradigm, and action research. Researchers generally work within one of these paradigms, as they tend to share the same worldviews and work within similar fields of interest as their chosen paradigm (Cohen et al., 2018).

3.2.1: The positivist paradigm

Cohen et al. (2018) claim the positivist paradigm is a technical approach to research based on concrete, scientific, and objective evidence. Findings from experimentation with the generated hypotheses in positivist research can be verified by others and are therefore generalisable, measurable and replicable. For this reason, researchers who align themselves with this paradigm tend to favour quantitative data collection methods. The use of 'I' in this

form of research is avoided and the researcher is removed from the findings completely. Researchers who use this approach disregard the impact that human nature, culture, society and free-will can have on the outcomes of their research (Kincheloe, 2012; Cohen et al., 2018).

3.2.2: The interpretivist paradigm

The interpretivist paradigm is often viewed as 'anti-positivism' or 'post-positivism' (Cohen et al., 2018) and considers research and knowledge as being influenced by humankind, cultural contexts, and lived experiences. Therefore, interpretivist research cannot be viewed as generalisable or easily measured in the way positivist research can (Aubrey, 2000). According to McIntosh, interpretivism supports real world research, claiming it is 'an antidote to positivism' (2010: 178) as it does not separate the researcher from the research. The approach is used in social sciences, where qualitative data methods are favoured over quantitative methods.

3.2.3: Action research

Although on the surface the interpretivist approach may seem similar to AR, the difference lies in the philosophical underpinnings. AR is described by academics as practice-based (McAteer, 2013), participatory and democratic (Gaventa and Cornwall, 2008), empowering (Glenn et al., 2023), and cyclical in nature (Cohen et al, 2018). AR supports the researcher to generate their own living theory, and is a methodology linked to values and relationships (McNiff, 2013; Whitehead, 2006). McAteer (2013) states all AR models contain elements of reflective practice. Coghlan and Brydon-Miller (2014) claim AR combines actions, or interventions, with reflection to create meaning and support implementation of further cycles. The reflective process associated with AR encourages the researcher to look outside themselves, consider multiple viewpoints, and incorporate literature (McNiff, 2013; Brookfiled, 2017). While day to day reflection may have an impact upon data, it is critical reflection in AR that truly causes an awakening within the researcher, uncovers assumptions and recognises living contradictions (Brookfield, 2017; Whitehead, 2006).

3.2.4: Self-study action research

Self-study action research (SSAR), as the name suggests, involves educators completing research on themselves (Nyanjom, 2017). It requires the educator to delve into an enquiry

about their practice, aiming to eventually improve how they teach. As a methodology, Choi (2011) claims the fact that the researcher is also a participant causes academics to challenge the credibility of SSAR. Therefore, it requires the educator to add additional validation methods, such as critical friends, and complete critical reflection to uncover assumptions and biases (Brookfield, 2017).

Although I work with others in my setting, SSAR is an appropriate method for this study as it provides me the opportunity to explore my own values and practice (McNiff and Whitehead, 2016). While my colleagues are undergoing their own studies as part of their professional development, I felt the need to try to improve my practice. In addition, undertaking this research provided an opportunity to implement changes within the setting, potentially leading to an improvement in practice and provision (McDonagh, 2020). Self-study also gives the researcher an opportunity to delve into a topic that they are passionate about (Glenn et al., 2023), which for me is living closer to my personal values.

3.3: Research design

According to McNiff (2013) student researchers can only begin to design the research when they have settled upon the question that they want to address. Once the question has been established both ontological and epistemological values must be considered as they influence the choice of research methodology and data collection methods used (Glenn et al., 2023). As previously stated in Chapter one, ontological values refer to the researcher's beliefs regarding how knowledge is acquired and created (McNiff, 2013). When I began to articulate my ontological values, I realised I believe that learning happens in the context of relationships and interactions (Hedges and Cooper, 2018) and aim to create connections with the children I teach and care for as well as their families and my colleagues.

My epistemological values align with constructivist theories such as Dewey, Vygotsky, Bruner and Piaget, which suggest that knowledge is not something that is simply transmitted by teacher to child, but is constructed through interaction with the world (Mooney, 2000; Smidt, 2011). I also align with Froebelian principles and the philosophy of the REA where play is valued and the belief that learning occurs through creative engagement with the world (Bruce, 2012; Rinaldi, 2006). I view children as being agentic, capable beings, and therefore, value supporting children's agency through creating an environment that acts as 'the third teacher' (Rinaldi, 2006).

It is important to interrogate these values as "taking stock of your own ontological and epistemological positioning will help you to communicate how you see action research" (McNiff, 2013:54). I aimed to improve my practice and live closer to my values, therefore, as SSAR involves placing the researcher at the centre of the research and focus on their practice, this methodology was the most appropriate to use. There are many different AR models available for researchers to use in their project. I chose the Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) AR model.

3.3.1: The Kemmis and McTaggart action research cycle

According to Cook (1998) AR is often a 'messy' process, and researchers need to be prepared to embrace the unpredictable nature of the methodology. AR is cyclical in nature with no definitive end, continuing for as long as new issues arise (GayáWicks et al., 2008; Stringer, 2019). I chose the Kemmis and McTaggart AR cycle (Figure 3.1) as I felt the almost simplistic cycle of plan, act and observe, reflect, and review could help to counteract the possible messiness of the process.

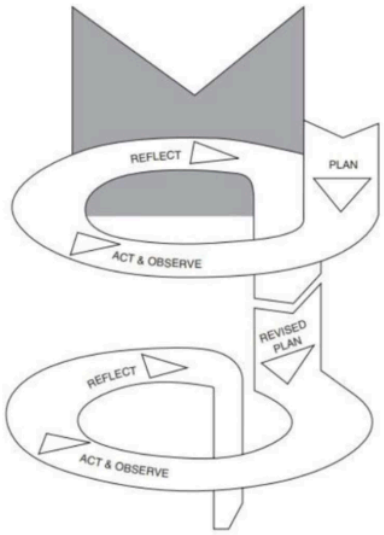

Figure 3.1: Kemmis and McTaggart action research cycle (2005:564)

Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) contend researchers need not follow the cyclical steps with blind faith. Instead, they advocate using the cycle as a guide to improve practice. This view

supports the purpose of AR, where the educator feels empowered to create change (McNiff, 2013).

3.3.2: Research cycle plans

To begin the first cycle, I created the following plan and timeline:

	Stage of AR cycle 1	Tasks
Week 1	Preparation	Give permission forms to participants. Meet with manager. Send questionnaire to colleagues.
Week 2	Plan	Prepare the atelier. Gather open ended materials.
Week 3 and 4	Act and observe	Use new materials and layout of the room as provocations. Ask open ended questions. Collect and document data.
Week 5	Reflect	Meet with critical friends. Review all data. Assess values. Identify emerging themes. Decide on intervention for cycle 2.

Table 3.1: Cycle one plans

The following plan was then created for cycle two:

	Stage of AR cycle 2	Tasks
Week 1	Plan: Assess documentation methods Increase communication with colleagues	Meet with colleagues and assess current documentation. Decide on documentation methods to make thinking visible. Implement strategies to increase communication with colleagues.
Week 2 and 3	Act and observe: Implement new documentation methods	Create art gallery display highlighting thinking processes. Create document to share with parents. Create a floor book for children to self-reflect on their learning. Create learning stories about emerging interests in the atelier.
Week 4	Reflect	Meet with critical friends. Review all data. Assess values. Identify emerging themes.

Table 3.2: Cycle two plans

3.3.3: Research participants

The three colleagues and my manager agreed to participate in the research. As well as my colleagues, all children were invited to participate. Out of the thirty-seven children that were invited, I received twenty permission slips back. All children were included in the research; however, data was only gathered from the children whose parents had granted permission.

3.3.4: Sampling

The sample used in this SSAR was a purposeful sample (Casselman, 2019). This form of sampling does not choose participants at random and is used in qualitative and action research (Stringer and Aragon, 2020). I work alongside the three colleagues and the twenty children that participated in this research daily, so therefore, their input and perspectives were highly valued. Although this is a small sample in comparison to some research projects, it is the right sample for this SSAR as it is focused on improving my own practice (Mukherji and Albon, 2010).

3.4: Critical reflection

Reflection usually involves an incident that causes a shock response, something that stops us in our tracks and needs addressing (Brookfield, 2017). Aistear states reflection supports us to understand incidents and develop a sense of self-awareness within our roles (NCCA, 2024). While reflection is crucial to practice, there is a distinction between reflective practice and critical reflection. Moon (2004) reminds us that critical reflection goes beyond reflecting upon singular events. It requires systematic and purposeful reflection over a longer period. Nyanjom (2017) claims through SSAR the critical reflection element is enhanced and complements the overall outcomes. To support my critical reflection throughout this SSAR I utilised Jasper's (2013) Experience, Reflection and Action (ERA) model of reflection (Figure 3.2) alongside Brookfield's (2017) four lenses reflective model (Figure 3.3).

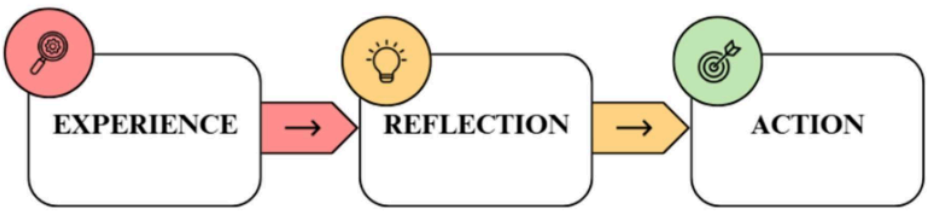

Figure 3.2: Jasper's (2013) ERA cycle (Image adapted by the Researcher).

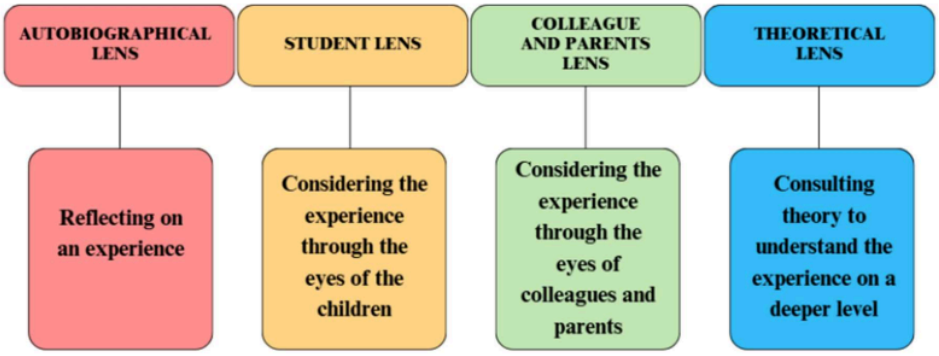

Figure 3.3: Brookfield's (2017) four lenses model (Image adapted by the Researcher).

I found the ERA model to be most useful when reflecting upon individual incidents and experiences. To complement this model, Brookfield's four lenses reflective framework supported me to view the incidents from different perspectives and support my understanding further. This was an important element of my SSAR. As I work closely with three colleagues, there were times when my own desires regarding this research caused me to forget their points of view. Through critical reflection, their needs were considered and complemented the outcomes once the research was completed.

3.5: Data collection methods

While quantitative methods are usually concerned with figures and statistics (Baumfield et al., 2008), qualitative methods involve gathering data through reflective journaling, observations, interviews, discussions, surveys and questionnaires (Dosemagen and Schwalbach, 2019). Data collection methods in AR often fall under the realm of qualitative methods (Glenn et al., 2023). Qualitative data methods are also thought to be best when involving young children in the research (Einarsdottir, 2007). As ontological and epistemological values impact on the design of the research (McNiff, 2013), they have also impacted upon my choice of data collection tools. A variety of data collection tools have been utilised to attempt to address potential power imbalances (Brookfield, 2017), to capture the voice of the children (Blaisdell et al., 2019), to support the input of colleagues (Glenn et al., 2023), and to triangulate of data (Baumfield et al., 2008).

3.5.1: Journaling

According to Morales (2019) journalling is a crucial data collection method in AR. Thoughts can be collected in real time through reflection *in* action and subsequently reflected upon further through reflection *on* action (Schön, 1983). My journal promoted reflexive, critical reflection throughout the data analysis process. This critical reflection led to confusion, followed by an awakening, where assumptions were unearthed (Brookfield, 2017) and living contradictions were realised (Whitehead, 2006).

3.5.2: Questionnaires

Mukherji and Albon (2010) believe questionnaires to be an appropriate method to gather information from people in an anonymous fashion. As I work closely with my colleagues and can recognise their handwriting, I opted to use an anonymous online questionnaire platform. I felt this allowed them to give their honest opinion while also ensuring I would not be biased towards one person's opinion over another. According to Mukherji and Albon (2010) it is useful to pilot a questionnaire. I engaged with my supervisor and critical friends to suggest edits to questions and the overall questionnaire before sending the link to colleagues (see appendix A or questions used).

3.5.3: Dialogue

Delong claims dialogue provides “a practical and rigorous research method that.....can strengthen the data used for supporting a claim to know” (2020:72). Glenn et al. (2023) maintain engaging in dialogue creates a clearer picture of our ideas and thoughts. If using dialogue and discussion as a data collection tool, Dosemagen and Schwalbach (2019) contend researchers need to explicitly state this to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. Methods of dialogue can include informal and formal discussion or can be digital in the form of emails or online group chats (Glenn et al., 2023). Informal discussions with colleagues were utilised throughout the cycles to gather information in real time regarding the effectiveness of interventions. These discussions can be useful to help identify any area that was overlooked in the questionnaire (Aubrey, 2000; Holliday, 2002).

I also had regular formal discussions with colleagues at staff meetings. These happened towards the end of each cycle and contributed towards the planning of interventions for the following cycle as well as the overall data collection. I found these discussions useful as they guided me towards understanding if I was living to my values and

promoted a shared pedagogical understand regarding the REA. Dialogue with critical friends was also utilised as a data collection method. As suggested by MacDougall and Baum (1997), I asked my critical friends to take on the role of devil's advocate. In doing so, I hoped they would provide constructive feedback, offer different points of view, question my decisions and keep my biases in check.

3.5.4: Photography and anecdotal observations

Although both questionnaires and interviews are appropriate research tools, there were more appropriate data collection methods available to use with children such as photographs and observations (Thomson, 2008). To better understand the meaning behind the children's creations and play in the art room I took photographs and asked open-ended questions such as 'tell me all about what you made' and 'I wonder' questions (Burke, 2008). Their answers were recorded in anecdotal form on post-its. These observations were not just recorded by myself, but my colleagues also.

The photographs were taken while always using an 'ethical radar' (Skånfors, 2009). I then printed these photographs and displayed them as documentation in a similar style to the REA (Rinaldi, 2006). This visual display provoked further discussion among the children (Clark and Moss, 2011), providing data that was recorded as anecdotal observations also. I ensured photographs and anecdotal observations were matched up to support the analysis of the data (Prior and Herwegen, 2016). Overall, these methods supported me to make children's thinking visible, which connected to the research question regarding the increasing the influence of the Reggio Emilia.

3.5.5: Semi-structured interview

Interviews are thought to provide worthwhile data as structured, or semi-structured questions can provide verbal perspectives (Glenn et al., 2023). I used a semi-structured approach to my interview with my manager. Interview questions were created based on the research questions (appendix B), but as it was a semi-structured interview, they did not need to be explicitly followed (Cohen et al., 2018). The nature of a semi-structured interview allows for the discussion to follow unexpected lines of questioning, possibly leading to new information or topics that may not have been thought of while creating the questions. The advantage of having the questions there, however, is that they guide the conversation back

to the topic that needs to be addressed should the discussion go off course (Glenn et al., 2023).

3.6: Data analysis

Analysing the collected data is a crucial stage of all AR (Baumfield et al, 2008). It is through analysis that we can understand if practice has been improved, and if not, why? (Glenn et al., 2023). The data analysis in this research aimed to identify findings related to the research questions. It was important to use a critical lens and acknowledge both positive and negative outcomes (McNiff and Whitehead, 2016). Glenn et al. (2023) claim data analysis informs pedagogical decisions. Therefore, the analysis of the data in this SSAR informed the interventions that took place.

3.6.1: Reflexive thematic analysis

To analyse the data gathered throughout this SSAR I utilised the six steps of Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) reflexive thematic analysis (Figure 3.4).

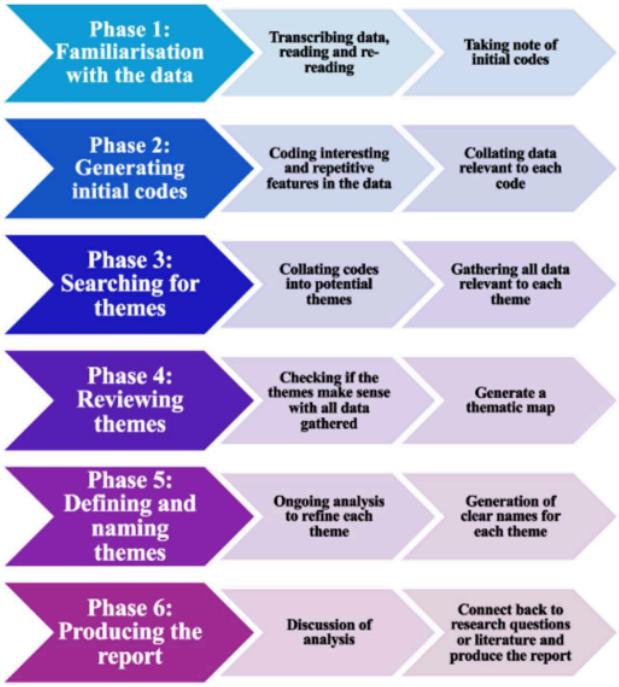

Figure 3.4: Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic analysis (Image adapted by Researcher).

This approach was chosen as it is thought to be appropriate when analysing qualitative data (Cohen et al., 2018). When analysing data through a reflexive thematic approach, the aim is to undertake a thoughtful, critical and insightful analysis of the collected data (Byrne, 2022). Codes were generated to connect elements of the data and reflexive thematic analysis then enabled me to identify patterns. The emerging themes were then considered alongside my research questions. The reflexivity of this approach considers the active role of the researcher, therefore allowing space for me to compare with my values and use them as standards of judgement (Whitehead, 2006).

3.7: Validity

To provide credibility to qualitative data and the research Flick (2006) suggests cross-checking the data across multiple sources, also known as triangulation (McDonagh et al, 2019). Triangulation creates an understanding of what happened from multiple perspectives, providing a richer, more detailed picture (Robson and McCartan, 2016). In this SSAR data was gathered from multiple sources as mentioned above. Connecting the gathered data to the reviewed academic literature discussed in Chapter 2, further validated the results of the SSAR (Golafshani, 2003; McDonagh, 2020).

3.7.1: Critical friends

Having critical friends involved in the research is thought to validate the findings and support conclusions (Foulger, 2010). As a researcher and participant in the research, it was important to have an outside perspective to understand if my conclusions and findings were being influenced by my own biases. Critical friends can act as validators, providing a certain level of confidence that your research is meaningful, or point out areas that need additional work (McDonagh et al., 2019).

I had two separate groups of critical friends that gave different but equally important perspectives and advice throughout this SSAR. The first group involved my colleagues, while the second group involved two early years educators who work in other settings. They both have an academic background but did not work in my setting and therefore were removed enough to provide some “candour and honesty” (Glenn et al., 2023:11). Informal discussions happened with my colleague critical friends daily. I met with my second group of critical friends virtually at the end of each cycle to go through the data. The viewpoints of

both groups were invaluable when deciding what interventions to put in place and grouping data into themes to generate findings.

3.7.2: Values as a standard of judgement

Glenn et al. (2023) suggest establishing standards of judgement at the beginning of an AR to assess if you are achieving these standards throughout the data collection process. The standards of judgement I created were based on my ontological and epistemological values as well as the research questions. These standards were as follows:

1. Is there a notable increase in the influence of Reggio Emilia in the art room
2. Has children's creativity increased
3. Has children's agency increased
4. Were relationships and interactions supported

I chose to share these standards with my colleagues who helped to assess if I was meeting them throughout the research cycles or becoming a 'living contradiction' (Whitehead, 2006). These standards, as well as discussions with critical friends and the data gathered from my other data collection tools, provided rigour and authenticity to this SSAR (Glenn et al., 2023).

3.8: Ethical considerations

Before the research could progress, an ethics statement was submitted for approval to the University. I was guided by The Ethical Code for Early Childhood Researchers (EECERA) (Bertram et al., 2025), Maynooth University Ethical Guidelines and the ethical guidelines in my workplace throughout the research process.

3.8.1: Informed consent and assent

Tian (2023) states research that takes place in educational settings often involves vulnerable people, such as young children who may also have additional needs. As this was the case for my SSAR an information sheet and consent forms were created and given to parents, colleagues, critical friends, children and management of the setting before the research process began (appendix C). I collected signed consent forms from those that were happy to participate. Participants were reminded that they could withdraw permission at any time throughout the research process without any repercussions. Participants were also reminded

that the findings will be published on the Maynooth University Research Archive Library online. Throughout the research I ensured that I gained consent from each child on a constant basis by asking them and using an 'ethical radar' as consent from the children may involve behaviour rather than words (Skånfors, 2009).

3.8.2: Power dynamics

As I am in the role of educator and researcher working alongside three colleagues and involving children in this SSAR, addressing power dynamics needed careful consideration. Einarsdottir (2007) notes adult led research risks enforcing power over children and silencing their voices. As children's agency is a value I hold dear, I was conscious to address this by always using my 'ethical radar' (Skånfors, 2009). My ethical responsibility to address power imbalances extended to other participants also, such as parents and colleagues. The EECERA ethical code (Bertram et al., 2025), Maynooth University's code of ethics and my settings code of conduct policy, informed my approach to addressing power imbalances.

The use of a plain language information letter ensured the details of the research was not over complicated and accessible and communicated that permission to participate in the research could be withdrawn at any time. I ensured colleagues understood the research was primarily about me and my practice, and my role was not in a supervisory capacity, however I respected their input as co-constructors of knowledge. Power dynamics also needed to be addressed when creating meaningful findings from the data. Mayne et al. (2018) claim researchers need to be cautious at the data analysis stage to ensure the powerful role they hold does not influence the findings in favour of a desired outcome. Brookfield contends "reflection becomes critical when it's focused on teachers understanding power and hegemony" (2017:9). Therefore, critical reflection was used to interrogate the power dynamics throughout the research process.

3.8.3: Confidentiality and anonymity

Mukherji and Albon (2010) claim participants identity must be protected at every stage of the research process. The name of the research site was not used throughout the SSAR, and I used pseudonyms to protect the individual identity of participants. When using a questionnaire to gather data from colleagues I used an online platform and sought no identifying data. This ensured I did not recognise the handwriting and allowed the participants the anonymity to answer the questions without any fear of repercussions.

3.8.4: Data storage

All soft copies of data were stored on a password protected device. Hard copies have been stored in a locked cabinet. I will follow all guidelines of the Data Protection Acts (1988-2018) and maintain storage of all data for the required period of 5 years.

3.9: Limitations

This SSAR was limited by the time frame as well as the group sample being small in scale. The findings, as is the case with most AR, could not be generalised or used to predict similar outcomes with other groups of children or within other settings (Dosemagen and Schwalbach, 2019). However, some of the findings in this SSAR could be transferable even if they are not generalisable as they relate to increasing the influence of the REA in an Irish early year's setting. Cohen et al. (2018) highlight personal biases that can occur in AR as a limitation. This issue was addressed though triangulation of multiple forms of data from multiple sources.

3.10: Conclusion

This chapter began with a description of the various research paradigms before justifying the chosen methodology of SSAR that underpins this research. How SSAR aligns with my ontological and epistemological values as well as the overall research aims of improving practice were then discussed. The research design was then outlined, including the chosen research cycle by Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) and an overview of the plans for both cycles. I described the range of data collection tools used in this SSAR, such as, reflective journaling, questionnaires, photographs, observations, dialogue with colleagues and critical friends and semi-structured interviews. Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic data analysis framework was introduced. The rigour and validity if the data was addressed through triangulation, discussion with my critical friends and utilising my values as a standard of judgement. Ethical considerations were discussed, including consent and assent, power dynamics, confidentiality and anonymity, data storage and the limitations of the research. The following chapter will present the analysis of the data that was collected over two cycles.

Chapter 4: Data analysis

4.1: Introduction

This chapter outlines both cycles of this SSAR. It begins with an exploration of the initial data collected through the dissemination of a questionnaire to my colleagues and the completion of an interview with my manager. This helped identify a baseline understanding of my current practices while also helping to assess whether I was living to my values. Following the analysis of this data, interventions for cycle one was decided upon. Data from cycle one was then presented, followed by an analysis of this data from which several themes emerged, to inform interventions for the second cycle. Again, data from cycle two is presented and analysed. The key findings are drawn from the data gathered from all participants in this study and conclude this chapter. The next section will discuss the baseline data.

4.2: Baseline data

Once my values were articulated I "gathered data to act as a baseline" (McNiff, 2013:149). Glenn et al. (2023) suggest assessing one's own values and connecting them to practice prior to engaging in a SSAR and perhaps using them as a catalyst for change. They also state multiple perspectives should be taken into consideration. To help assess whether or not I was living to my values, and identify a starting point for this research, I used a questionnaire with my colleagues and interviewed my manager.

4.2.1: Noticing a living contradiction

While reflecting on and interrogating my values, I recognised that I needed to research how I can improve children's overall agency in the setting and increase their free choice. As I attempted to observe the environment and my practice, I noticed a 'living contradiction' (Whitehead, 2006) behind this closed door (Image 4.1).

Image 4.1: The closed door of the Atelier

> *'I looked at the locked door to the art room today and realised it has not been opened in two days. That is two days where the children did not have an opportunity to use mark making materials, play with playdough, or explore the messy play tray. Why have I not opened the door? I have made many changes to the environment and routine in the last two years of working here but why is this change not occurring?..... I am looking at the closed door and the sign that states it is the 'atelier'. This was put there to try and implement a more Reggio Emilia inspired space. However, I don't think any of us know truly what an atelier is.'* (Reflective Journal, 09/01/2025)

In this moment I realised that while the children have agency in every area of the setting, this agency does not extend to the art room. I could see I was not living to my values. I had unknowingly supported a physical barrier to creativity. At this point, there was also another issue I noticed. While the setting was trying to implement a more Reggio Emilia inspired approach, I realised I knew extraordinarily little about this approach to ECE. When I examined the literature, I could see the principles of the REA relating to agency aligned with

my own values. It was also evident that our setting is quite unique in that we have the space to have an atelier much like the settings in Reggio Emilia, although other than being labelled the atelier it was not acting as one.

This realisation led to the creation of the overall research question 'How can I increase the influence of the REA in our art area?'. Reflection on this prompted additional questions 'what do I need to put in place to increase creativity in the art room?' and 'how can I live closer to my values regarding children's agency in the art area?' To begin this inquiry with an aim to answer these questions, I set about finding out my colleagues and my managers thoughts and feelings through questionnaires and a semi-structured interview.

4.2.2: Interview and questionnaire results

To understand my colleagues' feelings about the room and implementing a REA, I created an online questionnaire which would remain anonymous (appendix A). I hoped by using an online platform for the questionnaire where they remained unidentifiable, they would give a more honest opinion. Unfortunately, after two weeks, only one of my colleagues had completed the questionnaire and I needed to remind the rest to complete when they had the time. I then took the opportunity to have a semi-structured interview with my manager (appendix B). We discussed our expectations for the room, what we would and would not like in there, and how we might make it more Reggio Emilia inspired. We agreed it had become a bit of a dumping ground and there was a habit to put stuff in there and close the door.

Also, observation indicated that children appeared to only go in to partake in activities set up by adults, rather than freely explore the art materials. As well as the door being locked, the shelves also remained turned to the wall, therefore concealing their contents a lot of the time (Image 4.2). This created a secondary barrier to the art materials within the room. My manager remarked, *'I hate to see the shelves turned around, it's almost worse than the door locked because when it is opened the closed shelves ultimately close off all access within the room'.*

Image 4.2: Closed off shelving

When we discussed the set-up of the room, my manager mentioned she would like the space to be more aesthetically pleasing, stating *'maybe if we think it looks pretty and want to look after it then they (the children) will too'*. At this stage as my colleagues had still not completed the questionnaire, I took an opportunity to conduct an informal discussion about the room with them. They agreed the room needed to open every day and we needed to support the children's independence as much as possible. We discussed the sign on the door and what it means. One of my colleagues stated, *'I know a bit about Reggio, but I don't understand why it is called an atelier'*. Agreeing with this statement, I shared my own desire to learn and understand more about the REA through this research project, with the intention of improving the current space and creating a true atelier. Analysis of the baseline data would provide a starting point for this research.

4.3: Data analysis:

To analyse the data that was collected for baseline data and both research cycles, I used Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) reflexive thematic analysis as discussed in Chapter 3. I followed the six phases of the process, acknowledging my position as educator/researcher throughout.

4.3.1 Emerging themes from baseline data and planned interventions for cycle one

Through analysing the data themes began to emerge (Table 4.1).

Emerging themes from baseline data
Children's lack of access into and within the atelier
Adult directed art activities prioritised
A lack of children's creative agency
A desire to become more Reggio inspired

Table 4.1: Emerging themes from baseline data

The first theme that emerged form data collected in my reflective journal was in relation to access. The locked door restricted children's access to the atelier and the closed shelves further restricted the children's access to the materials. Additionally, through discussion we recognised that once the issue of free access for the children was addressed, another issue remained, regarding the prevalence of adult directed activities. Both issues directly impacted the children's creativity and art experiences. Freedom to enter the room and explore with materials independently had been greatly reduced. Consequently, children's overall agency and creativity was not being supported.

A final theme emerged regarding the attempted implementation of the REA. Data collected through observations and discussions indicated that while the sign on the door gave a 'nod' to Reggio Emelia, the atelier space itself was clearly not aligned with the principles of Reggio Emilia. As I also felt inadequately informed regarding the approach, I recognised a gap in my knowledge that needed to be filled through research to enable me to increase the influence of the approach within the space. Together, the issues and subsequent themes that arose from the baseline data became a catalyst for change. I therefore planned to implement the following interventions in cycle one to address these issues (Table 4.2).

Cycle one interventions
Increase access to the atelier
Rearrange and add more open-ended materials to the space
Support children's agentic creativity
Research the Reggio Emilia approach

Table 4.2: Cycle one interventions

4.4 Cycle one

Cycle one began at the end of January 2025. I began the first week by giving the permission and information forms out to participants. I was surprised at the number of parents that were interested in what I was doing. When I began to make changes to the room, I decided to remove the clutter. As previously stated, the room had become a dumping ground. Aesthetics is an integral element of the REA (Manera, 2022; Vecchi, 2010), and therefore improving the aesthetics of the space was crucial. I looked through images of ateliers and noticed a lot of natural materials, space, the use of light, and ways to display children's creations. I needed to find a balance between adding materials to the room while avoiding visual clutter (Tarr, 2001) so that the children's work is given space to speak (Dahlberg, 2012).

When I began to make changes to the room I wanted to add as many open-ended materials and loose parts as possible, another element that is important for Reggio Emilia inspired spaces (Daly et al., 2015). In this moment I missed ReCreate, a service where companies donated excess stock, and preschools could subscribe so they could gather these materials for their settings. In my reflective journal I noted '*I am finding it hard to gather loose parts. It was much easier when ReCreate was open. I loved going to see what treasures we could get to add to the environment'* (Reflective Journal, 22/01/2025). I decided to ask parents if they had any loose parts that they could donate. To ensure they did not donate further clutter, I provided them with a list of examples.

Involving parents is a fundamental element of the REA (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005), and therefore asking parents to contribute loose parts for the atelier was another step towards implementing the approach in our setting. We received lots of boxes, large cardboard tubes, small glass jars, old CDs, some plastic spools and some old wallpaper. I added some smaller

loose parts to our ‘make and do’ station and sand to the messy play tray as the children only had access to sand outdoors. This tray is often loaded with things we want to get out of the way and became the main ‘dumping ground’ of the room. I decided that utilising the tray for its intended purpose and adding sand would prevent this practice from continuing. To support other messy and sensorial play, we also use a tuff tray.

I then looked at how we could increase the children’s independence in the room. Pelo (2017) suggests presenting the materials on low shelves that are easily accessible and in containers that are easy for children to use. This supports children to be independent and enables them to select, use and return materials. At that time all paint was kept up high out of the reach of children. To address this, I added pump bottles filled with paint (Image 4.3) and attempted to make the area more aesthetically pleasing by placing coloured paint chip samples from the local hardware store on top of the shelves. I hoped by doing this in different shades the children might notice and want to create different colours with the paint.

Image 4.3: New accessible paint bottles aesthetically displayed

Rather than adding just the traditional stubby preschool paint brushes I added a variety of brushes from thin artist brushes to large household paintbrushes. For paint containers I used the donated small glass jars, as Pelo (2017) suggests these are more tactile and add to the painting experience. I also kept the painting trays we previously used for larger amounts of paint when needed. Other materials I added were new crayons, markers, colouring pencils, water paint trays, oil and chalk pastels, sponges and a variety of paper and card (Image 4.4). The materials were placed in small wicker baskets and easy to carry utensil holders, supporting the children to easily transport the materials to wherever they were needed.

Image 4.4: New materials added to the room

I placed these on low shelves and in such a way to invite interaction (Strong-Wilson and Ellis, 2007), provoke interest (Mages, 2016) and encourage independent decision making (Biermeier, 2015). While there was nothing wrong with some of the materials already in situ, such as the crayons and pencils, I still replaced them as Pelo (2017) claims writing materials need to be top quality to ensure positive interactions and care for the materials occurs.

To create a more natural environment and increase sensorial experiences I added plants to the room and essential oils for playdough. At this point I was at the end of the first week of cycle one and realised I could spend forever attempting to perfect the environment. I wrote in my reflective journal '*I feel like every time I look at the room, I notice something else that could be moved, added or taken away. The week for preparation is almost over so I think I am just going to have to get used to the idea that the room may never be perfect and creating the environment will be an ongoing process'* (Reflective Journal, 24/01/2025).

Throughout the first week I used mealtimes to create discussion with the children about the atelier. I wanted to better understand the children's expectations of the room and include their ideas in the setting up of the space. Several of the children said they wanted the room *'to be like a rainbow'*. Although completely painting the room was not in our budget,

I used the interest in rainbows to display the materials in a way that could be meaningful to them. As well as having the paint bottles displayed like a rainbow, I also placed the paper and similar materials in a rainbow display (Image 4.5).

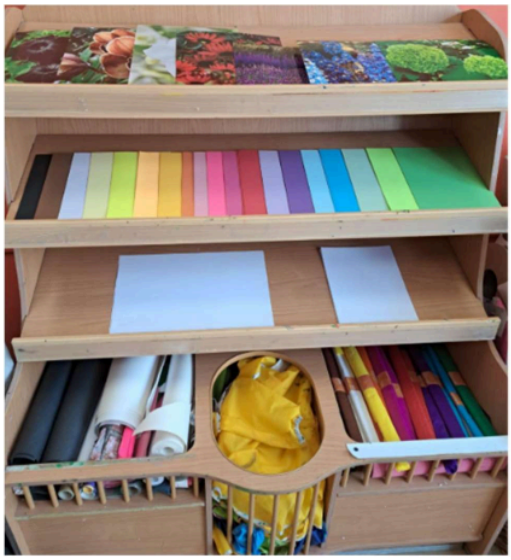

Image 4.5: Paper display

Consulting with the children, I asked them what they wanted to do in the atelier once it was set up, and the majority said they wanted to paint and use playdough. Consequently, I decided to use the new paint set-up as a provocation at the start of the second week. I divided the large group into smaller groups so that they could properly look around and the experience would not become overwhelming. At first, they noticed the layout of the room had changed.

> *Zoe points out what has moved.*
> *Hannah, looking around the room: "I didn't even know we had a sand tray."*
> *Me: "I know it was hiding."*
> *Hannah: "Hiding where?"*
> *Me: "It was covered in that corner."*
> *Hannah: "I didn't even see that there I thought that was just boxes."*

Then the children noticed the new paint bottles.

David: "Why is the paint in soap bottles."
Me: "I thought it might be better because now you can get the paint yourself instead of having to ask your teachers to get it for you."
Luke: "Can we paint now then?"
Michael: "The paint bottles look like a rainbow."
Grace: "But there's no black in rainbows."
Michael: "The sky can be a bit black sometimes."
Grace: "Yea when it's raining."
Michael: "Thats when the rainbows come out, after the rain."

I used direct instruction to show the children how to set themselves up to paint by getting a jar, picking a brush and deciding what paper or card to use. The children could also choose whether to paint at the easel or table. I was surprised at how many children wanted black, brown and white and noted this in my journal *'with all of the colours available to them I was shocked that so many chose black, brown and white. But now that I think about it these colours would have rarely been put out for the children to use before unless there were a specific art or craft that we wanted them to do, such as using white paint on dark paper for snow or black paint to make spiders'* (Reflective Journal, 29/01/2025).

At first the children painted in a sensorial way, choosing one or two colours at a time and covering their pages and hands. At the easel, children worked side by side and seemed happy for their paintings to overlap with others. If they wanted to do an individual picture, I directed them to get a sheet of paper instead of working at the easel. As the children started to paint more every day, their work became more detailed and stories within their work began to emerge. Conor's painting (Image 4.6) looked like simple black marks on a page, however once asked 'tell me about your painting' the true meaning of his marks emerged.

Image 4.6: Conor's painting

Conor: "This looks like my carpet."

Me: "Really? Why does it look like your carpet?"

Conor: "My sister didn't take her shoes off and got muck all over the new carpet and this is what it looks like."

Conor went on to describe the machine his Dad used to clean the carpet. At the same time, Grace told us about her painting of her sister (Image 4.7).

Image 4.7: Grace's painting

Me: "Tell me who is in your painting? They look really happy!"

Grace: "It's my sister playing in the snow. Look the snow is falling."

This painting caused me to pause and reflect with my colleague. I asked my colleague if they thought those details would have emerged with how we presented paint before. They said *"I am not sure. I think elements would have but the fact the paint remained separate, and she could use the white for the snow, may have led to her making that..... before the paint would be in trays as well and by now all the colours would be mixed and some shade of brown".*

I also noticed the variety of brushes available supported creative details in their work. In the below image (Image 4.8), Sienna painted Nemo. She opted to add eyes from the make and do station and use markers and pencils to add finer details.

Image 4.8: Sienna's painting of Nemo

Sienna's creative side started to shine at this stage. She proudly showed us her drawing of her favourite toy animal, a pheasant (Image 4.9), and wanted it displayed in the main room.

Image 4.9: Sienna's pheasant

This led to a discussion about birds, which subsequently led to Thomas enthralling us with his knowledge regarding Sandwich Terns. I noted that evening *'Thomas probably taught me more today than I did him. I do not think his knowledge of these birds would have come to light had it not been for Sienna's drawing and her insisting it be placed on the wall. I am going to have to decide on where their work will be displayed soon, and more importantly how it will be displayed'* (Reflective Journal, 06/02/2025). Our first interest emerged from Sienna's piece of artwork; the drawing of the pheasant led us to a large display of children's pets and favourite animals (Image 4.10).

Image 4.10: Display of children's pets and animals

The children started to mix colours in their jars, wondering what colours they could make. Some wanted to make colours darker or lighter and I showed them that adding white or black will do this. Alongside the paint, the children often made their own playdough. They enjoyed mixing the flour, water and oil and picking paint colours to add. They wanted to make 'rainbow playdough' and rainbows continued as an interest in their work. As the third week began, I decided to highlight the other materials in the room through provocations. I arranged the oil pastels in a similar fashion to the paint by organising them in jars and divided into colours. I also added some colour wheel print outs and flowers with blended petals, hoping to build on their interest in colour mixing and rainbows (Image 4.11).

Image 4.11: Oil pastel provocation

This provocation worked in the way that provocations are supposed to, it triggered interest, sparked discussion and supported the creation of new knowledge (Strong-Wilson and Ellis, 2007; Biermeier, 2015). It provoked conversations about rainbows, flowers and colours in nature. The provocation also encouraged exploration of newly available materials that had been overlooked up until this point. Although I did not want to derail their interest in paint, I did, however, hope to encourage an exploration of the room. Up to this point, the children painted every day solely with paint brushes and on paper. They had not touched the boxes or carboard tubes and rarely used the crayons or other writing materials.

Although I thought the interest in this provocation may only last one day, I left it set up for the next day. I felt by doing this I could tell if there was a genuine interest in the

material or if it was fleeting. The children came in and some did prefer to paint again, but others seemed to enjoy the oil pastels. I noticed two children who would not normally interact much with each other sitting together and colouring with the pastels on the same page and wondered what they were doing.

> *Me: "Tell me what you are doing here, you look like you are working together?"*
> *Lucy: "I'm showing Leah that these crayons can mix the way the paint does."*
> *Leah: "I wasn't here yesterday."*
> *Me: "Oh that's right. What do you think of the oil pastels? Do you see how they can blend together?"*
> *Leah: "Yea they're really cool, where did you get them?"*
> *Me: "In an art shop."*
> *Lucy: "Can we go one day?"*
> *Me: "Maybe the next time I am getting some materials for the room you could help me pick them out on the computer?"*
> *Both children: "Yea!"*

This moment reminded me that the REA celebrates collaboration (Rinaldi, 2006), and these children happily collaborated on their piece of work without any adult input. It also highlighted another issue that I had not thought of that prompted reflection, *"Maybe when I am making future purchases for the room, I should involve the children. Maybe this would increase their ownership over the space even more?"* As I ended the third week my colleagues remembered the questionnaire. Although not ideal, by completing it at this time I feel an issue was highlighted that I was unaware of. When asked "What changes would you suggest to better support creativity, agency, and collaboration in an atelier?" responses referred to the need to have more communication between the team:

> *Educator 1 response: I think an increase in communication between staff as to what is happening in the atelier may be beneficial.*

> *Educator 2 response: Discussions with staff regarding their observations and how the children's interests can be extended.*

Also, when asked "What kinds of documentation do you think should be used to showcase the children's work in a new Reggio Emilia inspired atelier?" respondents noted:

Educator 1 response: Showing the children's art more on the wall. For artwork with no names, it could be nice to put the pictures into a project folder so they can flip through the pictures.

Educator 2 response: Writing down conversations from the children and their descriptions of what they create.

Educator 3 response: Observations, to document how the children are using the materials and what they are drawn to, in order to further their learning.

These responses caused me to reflect on my practice from my colleague's lens (Brookfield, 2017), a perspective that until this moment I had neglected to focus on.

'*I just realised that while I have focused so much on creating the atelier space, encouraging the children's agency while in there, and supporting creativity as much as possible, I had neglected to include my colleagues, especially as the weeks went on. My communication has seriously been lacking, and on reflection I feel I have nearly excluded them from the whole process. If this was happening to me, I know I would feel left out and I am sure they do to. I am actually upset to think that they might be annoyed with me and hope I can change this situation.'* (Reflective Journal, 12/02/2025)

As the fourth week began, I met online with my critical friends and discussed this with them.

Critical friend 1 (CF1): I am sure if they were really annoyed you would have noticed, there would be an atmosphere surely.

Me: I'm not sure, we get on so well and I know they understand I am doing this for the master's so they might be just leaving me to it, but I hope they aren't annoyed at me. I think I would be annoyed if it was the other way around.

Critical friend 2 (CF2): I think you would know; I wouldn't get too hung up on it. The photos of what you have done so far look great. You're so lucky to have the space.

Me: I know. I think I am so used to it now that I nearly take it for granted.

CF2: Do you think it is more influenced by Reggio now?

Me: Well, I think it is definitely used more freely now, and the creativity has definitely increased. The amount of pictures we have is crazy.

CF1: Have you decided what you are going to do with them? Like, are they getting displayed yet or sent home? Isn't documentation a big part of Reggio as well?

CF2: Yes, it is, they are known for their pedagogical documentation.

Me: Some paintings are on the walls, but I've been so concentrated on bringing the children into the room, making sure it is used and that I have enough data for cycle 1 that I haven't really thought about displays and so on. If I'm honest the way they (Reggio) document the work in the books looks so intimidating!

CF2: Yes, it looks very artsy in some of the books, like they are from an art gallery. I suppose you just have to do things your own way. You are being inspired by Reggio, but it is still ok to do things in a way that suits you and your setting.

Me: True.

CF1: Maybe having more documentation to share would also support the issue with communication. You are doing all this work in the room but not sharing it with anyone yet.

When this discussion finished, I realised they were right. I had taken ownership of the room and that was never my intention. By focusing on my values regarding children's agency, I had forgotten my other values regarding the importance of collaboration and teamwork.

4.4.1: Emerging themes from cycle one and planned interventions for cycle two

At the end of cycle one I again utilised Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) reflexive thematic analysis to understand emerging themes from the data (Table 4.3).

Emerging themes from data gathered during cycle one
The impact of a thoughtful environment on children's agency and creativity
The impact of child-led play and creativity in the atelier
The impact of a variety of materials and resources on children's creativity
A need to improve communication with colleagues
Alignment with the Reggio Emilia approach beginning
A need to address documentation methods

Table 4.3: Emerging themes from cycle one

The first emerging theme gathered through observations, informal discussions with colleagues and photographs was the impact that the environment and the materials had on children's agentic creativity. The aesthetics and the way in which the materials were displayed, as well as the accessibility of the range of materials that were in offer, inspired children to independently paint and add details to their work that had not appeared previously. These changes aligned the space more closely to the REA, especially regarding the way in which the children were encouraged to be independent and how the environment supported this newfound independence further.

Communication between me and my colleagues, or lack thereof, was another theme that emerged from the data gathered in my reflective journal, the questionnaire and through a formal discussion with my critical friends. This issue weighed heavily on my mind and highlighted a forgotten value regarding the importance of teamwork in ECE. As I aim to live closer to my values, I knew this issue needed to be rectified.

Lastly, how to appropriately document the children's creative processes and thoughts while in the atelier was another theme that emerged from the data gathered in my reflective journal, the questionnaire, through observations, informal discussion and photographs. Documentation is another principle that is focused on within the REA. Therefore, to further increase the influence of the approach it is necessary to address the current documentation strategies. To address these issues highlighted in the data, the following interventions were planned for cycle two (Table 4.3).

Cycle two interventions
Meet with colleagues and assess current documentation
Decide on documentation methods to make thinking visible and align closer with the Reggio Emilia approach
Implement strategies to increase communication with colleagues

Table 4.4: Cycle two interventions

4.5: Cycle two

Cycle two began the end of February 2025. At the same time, I also started a new module that encouraged us to look at narrative reflections. In Cathy Nutbrown's paper 'A box of childhood: small stories at the roots of a career' (2011) she questions what she would put inside nine small drawers that could represent her life and career. Reading this paper caused me to pause and reflect on what I would place in the drawers, leading to me reflecting upon my own early education. I recorded the following piece in my journal.

> *'What actual memories do I have of playschool or is it just that I knew my Mam worked there, therefore surely it was an amazing place. I remember playing at the sand and water trays, painting at the easel, and playing at the toy kitchen. I remember the two plain biscuits at circle time saying prayers. I remember feeling free to play there, to figure things out for myself, to move, to laugh, and above all else, to paint every single day. I remember the stack of paintings my Mam had belonging to me, and the others that covered a wall in the kitchen. When I went on to primary school, I remember art suddenly becoming about colouring inside the lines. I remember drawing a picture of three blind mice and the clock in orange and blue on the back of a worksheet and being proud but told that was not what I was supposed to do. I remember being given a picture of a witch to bring home at Halloween and protesting telling my teacher that was not my witch, then telling my Mam not to put that on the wall. I thought of these memories from playschool and Junior infants, not realising that these were defining moments that could possibly be connected to my forty-year-old self and my current practice.'* (Reflective Journal, 28/02/2025)

This reflection has resulted in me connecting my current values regarding children's agency, my passion for process-based arts, and my past experiences of both as a young child. My understanding of the importance of being an advocate for children's agentic participation in art experiences and the need to apply a pedagogy of listening has subsequently evolved and become more critical. This viewpoint aligns with the Reggio Emilia philosophy, where children are understood to have 'one hundred languages' and it is the role of the pedagogista to be attuned to them (Smidt, 2013; Strong-Wilson and Ellis, 2007). I want to ensure all children in my care feel the freedom I felt in preschool, and understand it is ok to be as creative as possible. To do this I needed to make the children's work visible and document the children's thoughts better.

In an informal meeting I discussed this with my colleagues, and we agreed the current curriculum plan does not work as there is not enough room to consider 'separate but connected' interests that may arise in the atelier. I also needed to address the lack of communication about what happens in the room, and we agreed to work towards more open dialogue regarding planned provocations and children's observations. Therefore, I devised a plan that would document the learning and interests in the atelier and could be brought to planning meetings for integration into the curriculum.

These plans, although simple and straightforward, allowed space for the evolving nature of process arts (Pelo, 2017). I discussed the need to document the thinking of the children and my frustration regarding the lack of clear guidance as to how it is done correctly in Reggio Emilia. I noted in my work journal my colleague's response, "*We discussed this in college as well, we were saying we wished there was some sort of guidance document or clear example of how to do it, but it seems almost mysterious".*

I had recorded in my reflective diary a similar sentiment, *'I am not sure where to start. The documentation in the publications by Reggio Emilia looks like art galleries, yet other publications are very Americanised and do not come across as true to the Reggio Emilia approach. I am going to research more about pedagogical documentation in general to see if that gives me ideas'* (Reflective Journal, 04/03/2025). I decided to start with creating a wall display highlighting the children's learning with the pastels (Image 4.12). I used black sheets for the background, added the children's work with some anecdotal observations,

some photographs of the provocation, and a description of what happened. I aimed to keep this neat and not add visual clutter (Tarr, 2001) to the room.

Image 4.12: Pastel wall display

Then on another wall a spontaneous display was created by the children where they each chose a painting they wanted to hang up, telling me why they wanted them up and stories about the images (Image 4.13). I added a piece of documentation explaining the children's newfound independence with the paint materials and some images.

Image 4.13: Spontaneous wall display

These displays sparked discussions between the children, and I was amazed at how many could pick out not just their own but also their friend's work. I realised that the children need more opportunities to reflect and discuss their work than they are currently given. Currently, we create an interest wall where photographs from the previous week are added, and interests are built upon. However, at the end of the month these photographs are filed away, never to be seen again (Image 4.14). As I printed out lots of photographs of the children in the atelier, I also took out the other images and created a floor book for the children (Image 4.15) This

had no words or comments added at first but had lots of space for children's observations to be added. When I added the floor book to the main floor of the setting the children were amazed looking back at themselves over the last few months. The floor book soon got known as the 'photo album' as one of the children announced he had loads of these at home.

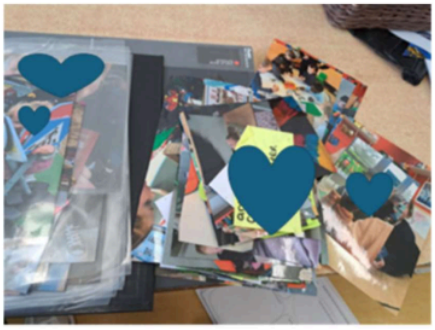

Image 4.14: Photographs filed away

Image 4.15: The 'photo album'

I recorded comments from my colleagues in my work journal, such as *'It's crazy to see how much we have done this year'* and remembering activities or interests the children had that were since forgotten about. Again, the children could easily recognise other's creations even without prompts or being able to see them in the images. For instance, the images below (Image 4.16 and Image 4.17) are all in the floor book and straight away children knew who did them and what they were.

Image 4.16: Conor: *"That's Ella's robot, she loves making them"*

Image 4.17: Mia: *"Thats Sophie's hedgehog she was painting it purple it's her favourite colour"*

During an informal discussion with my manager, she suggested ways we could share the changes that has happened in the atelier with parents. I also felt I wanted to explain a number of issues that have occurred since the changes, such as children going home with paint or clay on their clothes, or why some children have lots of artwork and others have none. I decided to make a short document to print and give to parents. At this time the children

became interested in QR codes. Every time they saw one, they would ask us to scan them and see what would come up. This interest reminded me of an article I read, and I recorded an idea in my diary.

> *'We have been trying to come up with ideas to share the new space with parents and everything that has been happening in the atelier. We suggested parents come in and visit the space, but we didn't have much uptake. The children have been interested in QR codes lately, and I remember I read an article from NAEYC (West, 2018) where the teachers created a large document about an art display, connected it to a QR code, shared this with parents and then they had instant access to not just a page of information but lots of images and so on. I don't know how to do QR codes though so will need to look into that. I think the children would be really excited to have a QR code that leads to images of themselves, their friends and their work.'* (Reflective Journal, 11/03/2025)

The next day I discussed the idea with my colleagues, and they agreed the children would love it. My manager said she knew how to make QR codes, and I agreed to make the PDF document. The children loved scanning the QR code (Image 4.18) and left preschool that day waving pieces of paper for their parents to scan at home and view the PDF (appendix D).

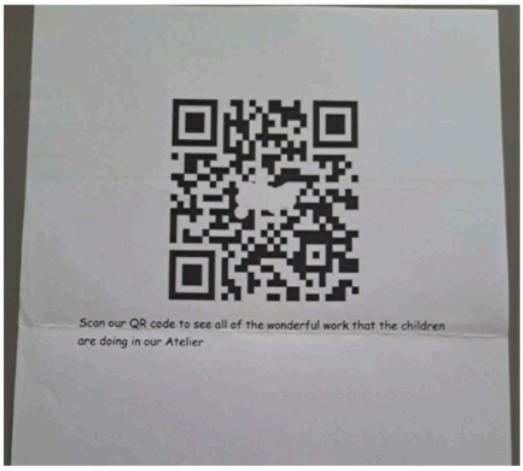

Image 4.18: QR code

I wanted to highlight the creativity that is happening in the room in the document, but I feel the most influential elements were explaining why some children are going home messier than before, and why some children have more artwork than others. Through meta-reflection I realised this is an issue that had also arisen during cycle one and I felt I needed to address it.

> *'I feel awful. Some of the children made Valentine's Day cards and were really into cutting the flowers from the Lidl catalogue. But others just weren't interested. Some made the cards then painted over them, folded them up and by the time they were finished there was no form of card left. I feel I need to respect their right to choose and encourage process over product, but I know some parents might be disappointed.'* (Reflective Journal, 13/02/2025)

Therefore, this document highlighted the fact that although some children may not go home with pieces of works like others do, it does not mean they did not participate. While my colleagues scanned the document to show the children, one of them brought up an issue that I was also having myself and I recorded it in my work diary. They said, *"I love the document, but my only issue is the term 'atelier'. I know it is the Reggio term, but I feel like we all call it the art room, so it is hard to change to call it that, and I don't think parents will get it really"*.

I agree to an extent and had previously recorded this on a number of occasions in my reflective journal, *'I do not feel the term atelier works for the space, and by using the name for the room does not make it more affiliated with the approach. I have read about the fact that the approach needs to be adapted to local cultural practices. Therefore, is calling the room an art room really reducing the influence of Reggio Emilia? Surely the approach is more than a set of terms used in another language that is meaningless to the children that use the space. Maybe we should use a term in Gaeilge, fully adapting the approach to an Irish context?'* (Reflective Journal, 20/03/2025). Therefore, this appears to be another recurring issue that needs to be addressed somehow.

Throughout this cycle, creativity in the atelier has continued and there is a true sense of ownership in the room now. Every corner has creations. Some are ongoing such as boxes being painted and large cardboard tubes, pieces of clay are drying and waiting to be painted alongside some completed pieces, and there are now stacks of pictures to be sorted and sent

home. I noticed one of my colleagues is joining me in the room more often. One of the days, the children were painting and were trying to paint over the coloured feathers and 'hide' them. My colleague told the children 'It is like they are camouflaged' and this sparked a discussion about how animals hide. Subsequently, this stimulated a conversation between us which I later recorded in my work diary.

> *Me: You're coming into the art room more now; you usually seem to avoid it.*
>
> *Colleague: I don't really avoid it; I just always left everyone else to do the activities in here, they were always very organised, it just seems more free flowing now.*
>
> *Me: It's great you are coming in; I wouldn't have thought to make that connection between them painting feathers and camouflage.*
>
> *Colleague: Ah you would have.*
>
> *Me: No, I genuinely don't think I would have. You have a different perspective on things.*

After this conversation, I noted my colleague came in almost daily now. Their perspective on what the children were doing seemed completely opposite to what I would see. This reminded me of the collaborative nature of documentation, and the need for different perspectives. I then went through all of the data I have gathered and utilised Braun and Clarke's (2019) thematic analysis to divide the data into codes and emerging interests. With a new lens I realised there was a clear interest in mixing and creating colours. This realisation led to a reflection in my diary.

> *'I was looking for something more profound than colour mixing. When the discussion occurred regarding camouflage, I remember thinking this is great, hopefully this will end up being a project. But, when I look at the documentation, what they were really doing was mixing colours to try and match the feathers, therefore hiding them in the paint. I cannot believe I missed it, it seems so obvious now. Even with the oil pastels it went back to mixing the colours and layering them to create new ones.'* (Reflective Journal, 25/03/25)

Now that I had a definite line of enquiry, I had to face up to another issue that I was avoiding. The issue was repeatedly arising in my reflective journal throughout this cycle.

> *'I do not know where to start with documenting in the style of Reggio.'* (Reflective journal, 27/02/2025)

> *'I looked through some books from the library about Reggio, the documentation seems so alien to me. It belongs in art galleries. I don't know where to start.'* (Reflective journal, 03/03/2025)

> *'I feel like I am observing the children, taking photographs, writing their comments down, but I still do not have what seems to be 'Reggio inspired' documentation.'* (Reflective journal, 12/03/2025)

As I looked through the literature, I found an article by Carol Ann Wien (2011) that discussed 'five aspects of teachers progression toward pedagogical documentation'. I felt this article gave a clear and concise framework to use when attempting to improve documentation practices. It also made me realise it is an ongoing process and not something that will be achieved over night. Inspired by this article, I began a documentation panel to highlight the children's interest in creating colours. Wien (2011) suggests looking towards graphic design elements when creating documentation panels, and to remember that less is more when it comes to words and pictures. It is also evident that pedagogical documentation in Reggio Emilia often involves poetic language, almost romanticising the learning that has occurred. I titled the panel 'when colours collide' (Image 4.19) and used phrases such as those in the image below (Image 4.20).

Image 4.19: Documentation panel

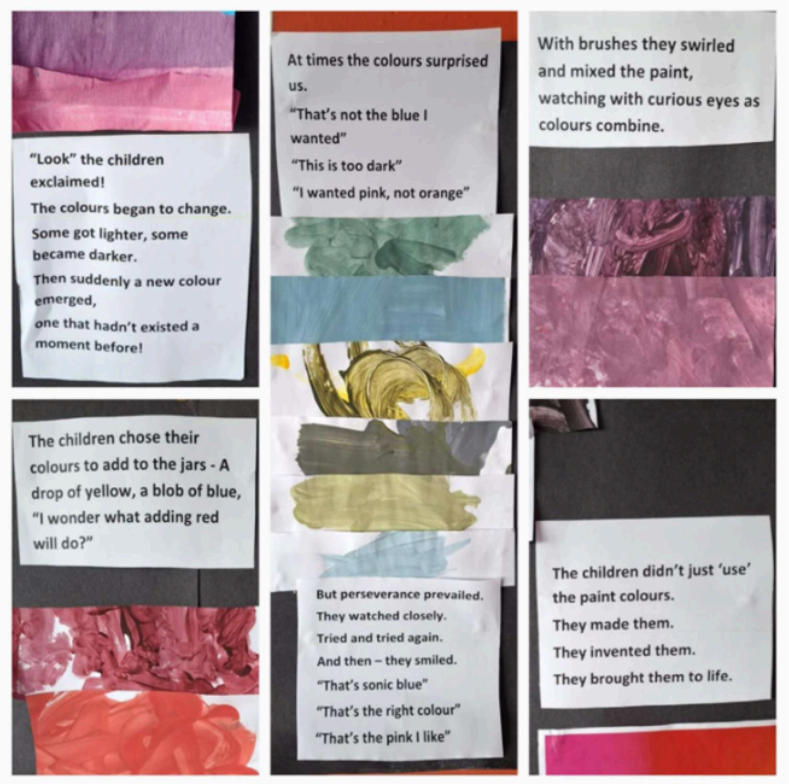

Image 4.20: Phrases used in documentation panel

I felt quite self-conscious adding these phrases to the documentation. They were not words I would usually use, typically leaning more towards analytical descriptions to highlight the learning and development that I felt had occurred. However, I felt by using phrases such as these there was more energy to the documentation, and the excitement came across. It also doesn't feel finished, which would have bothered me before but on reflection I can see this is probably for the best.

> *'This panel feels different. At first, I thought it was because the language I used had pushed me out of my comfort zone. However, I think it is the first time I have made documentation purely for the children. Not for evidence of learning should we get an inspection, not for parents, not even for data for the thesis. I have thought about how I can add the children's words to the panel and how they can change it if they wish. I have also tried to predict where it might lead to but have learned not to make*

presumptions. I feel the children own this panel, this room and cannot wait to see where they, rather than me, will take it next.' (Reflective Journal, 26/03/2025)

Towards the end of the cycle, I had another online meeting with my critical friends. I sent them some images of the work to date, and one of the first things my friends said when we met was 'look at you acting like you're Shakespeare!' Embarrassed, I instantly attempted to defend my words.

Me: "I'm definitely not a poet that's for sure"

CF2: "Ah I'm joking, I actually love it I wouldn't use phrases like that either, but it makes the work seem more important, like I want to see them mixing the paint for myself"

Me: "That was the aim, to energise it. Does it seem clear and logical? Like, can you tell what happened and what the point of the panel is?"

CF2: "Yes, it's clearly about making colours with paint. I guess my only criticism would be what is the rainbow for? That isn't explained."

CF1: "Yea actually what is that for, it is kind of just there in the corner."

Me: "You know I don't really know what I was thinking adding that. I know I have lots of observations where the children talk about wanting to make rainbows, the paint in the jars look like rainbows and so on. Maybe that was where my mind went with that."

CF1: "Have the children said anything about it? Like, has it provoked them in any way?"

Me: "Just to use the crepe paper to make their own rainbows. Now that I think about it, when they were using the glue, they noticed the colour ran and mixed from the paper and we mixed some in water."

CF2: "Maybe move the rainbow towards the right of the panel so it reads from left to right. From start to finish. Well not finish because it is ongoing but to where it is at now. Then add about the rainbows they made and the colours running in the water."

Me: "Yea that makes sense. I was so caught up in the phrases and language that I completely missed that."

While spending time adjusting the documentation and recording children's comments on it, I noticed I am beginning to spend more time painting and colouring alongside the children now. The children ask me what I am doing, sometimes I reply with 'just painting' other times I have an idea in my head that might spark their interest. This caused me to reflect upon my actions in the atelier and record this in my journal.

> *'I have noticed that by painting with the children, I am slowing down and not tidying around them and therefore they are slowing down. Also, my paintings are often provoking the children's interests. So have my actions and what I do, or not do, become a provocation in itself?'* (Reflective Journal, 03/04/2024)

As both cycles evolved and I continued to create with the children, I also noticed we are truly becoming co-creators and collaborators together.

> *'Our ideas are merging now. I have always believed that the children have much to teach me, but now it is more like we are learning together. Today Katie made green by adding a little bit of black to yellow and white. I never would have thought those colours could produce such a green but here we are!"* (Reflective Journal, 03/04/2025)

4.5.1: Emerging themes from cycle two

This cycle went on for longer than expected, and to be honest, is still ongoing. However, by analysing the data gathered through discussions, observations, photographs, dialogue with critical friends and my reflective journal throughout cycle two further themes emerged (Table 4.5).

Emerging themes from data gathered during cycle two
The impact of reflection on practice
The influence of the Reggio Emilia approach on documentation practices
The educator as co-creator and collaborator
Improved collaboration with colleagues
Utilising technology to share the learning with parents

Table 4.5: Emerging themes from cycle two

Firstly, personal reflection and connection to my own values featured heavily in this cycle. Narrative reflections recorded in my journal allowed me to connect with childhood memories that I had long forgotten. I remembered situations from my own childhood where creativity was supported or constrained. I now recognise that these moments have shaped my values that I attempt to live closer to in practice as an adult. Through critical reflection and meta reflection my awareness heightened regarding the importance of creating an environment where children are free to create, explore and express themselves in the way that I was lucky enough to have experiences through early education.

A second theme that emerged was the development of Reggio inspired documentation practices. As highlighted through the data, I was intimidated by the beautiful and aesthetic displays that are evident in many of the Reggio Children publications or on their website. Also, I was unsure regarding what exactly was involved in documentation practices to make it more Reggio inspired. However, I committed to addressing how we authentically connect children's work with their thinking processes and encouraged the children to self-reflect on their work. This was done through documentation panels, their own spontaneous wall display and the introduction of the floor book, or photo album as the children named it. By doing this, I realised documentation was an ongoing process that will continue to evolve throughout my career in ECE. I can now also see how involving children in the documentation process supports their ownership over their learning, further enhancing their agency while in ECE.

The next theme that emerged from the data was the educator's role as co-creator and collaborator. I moved away from facilitating activities and the role of 'teacher' towards co-constructing knowledge alongside the children. This change was also evident in my colleagues' practice, particularly in their level of engagement regarding children choosing their own materials, what they wanted to create with them and subsequently extending their learning through meaningful discussions. Collaboration with colleagues improved through open dialogue between the team and new curriculum plans that connected the atelier to the rest of the setting better. Although parents did not come into the setting often, by using a pedagogy of listening and observing the children I connected their interests with an article I had read to support sharing the learning with parents. West's (2018) article suggested using QR codes to share documentation. This suggestion connected to an interest the children had in scanning QR codes to see what they linked to. By sharing the learning with parents

through their interest the children were excited, felt involved and parents got full explanations of the changes that were happening in the atelier alongside their children's work. Overall, the data highlighted a shift towards a more reflective, collaborative and child led approach in the atelier. This shift, I feel, ultimately led to me living closer to my values and showing that by naming my values I could use these as a catalyst for change.

4.6: Conclusion

This chapter involved analysing the data that emerged at the beginning of this SSAR and during both research cycles. Baseline data revealed a need to transform the atelier and align the space, and practice within the space, closer with the principles of the Reggio Emilia approach. Once the first cycle was complete, there were a number of positive findings such as an improved environment, the positive impact of materials and resources, and increased agency and participation. However, other findings indicated a need to improve communication and collaboration with colleagues as well as documentation practices. These findings led to the implementation of interventions aimed at improving communication and documentation. Once cycle two concluded, findings revealed personal reflection and values impacted upon my practice without my realisation. Documentation practices changed for the better, and additionally, there was a realisation that this is an ongoing process that will constantly evolve and there is no step-by-step guide to creating Reggio inspired documentation. Furthermore, Reggio inspired practices began to emerge in the atelier such a collaboration and co-creation, despite a recognition that there is a need to contextualise the approach. Finally, collaboration with colleagues improved through the implementation of new strategies. The sharing of knowledge with parents was also achieved by using the interests of the children and applying a pedagogy of listening. All of these combine to form three overall findings of this SSAR and will be discussed further in the next chapter.

Chapter 5: Discussion of the findings and overall conclusion

5.1: Introduction

This final chapter includes the discussion of the findings from this SSAR. Three overall findings are presented, relating to children's agency and creativity, documentation and the implementation of a Reggio inspired approach in an Irish ECE setting. The significance of each of these findings in relation to practice is considered throughout. An overall reflection is then presented, highlighting the 'messiness' of AR (Cook, 1998). This leads into a short discussion regarding my claim to knowledge, the limitations of the study and strategies for disseminating my research. The chapter concludes with a desire to continue participating in critical reflection with the purpose of further improving my practice.

5.2: Findings

The themes that emerged from the baseline, cycle one and cycle two data have been reviewed, refined and amalgamated to create the following overall findings of this SSAR, and help me to answer my main research question 'how can I increase the influence of the REA in our art area' and the additional questions 'what do I need to put in place to increase creativity in the art room?' and 'how can I live closer to my values regarding children's agency in the art area?'.

5.2.1: Children's agency and creativity are enhanced through a reflexive environment, a variety of resources and open-ended materials

The data gathered throughout both cycles highlights how removing barriers to the atelier and redesigning the layout of the space significantly improved children's agency and creativity, as suggested by Vecchi (2010), Biermeier (2015) and Bentley, (2013). This directly addresses my second research question regarding increasing creativity, demonstrating that increasing access to open-ended materials and reorganising the atelier supported children's agentic creativity. The baseline data gathered through my reflective journal and photographs, including the locked door and closed shelves, illustrated the physical barriers that were in place. Noticing the locked door and recording my feelings about it caused me to notice a living contradiction (Whitehead, 2006).

Identifying this contradiction connects to my third research question, highlighting how my values regarding children's agency were not initially reflected in practice. My

values regarding children's agency were not aligning with my practice. This finding is also consistent with the views of Daly at al. (2015). Introducing open-ended materials and loose parts in cycle one, as well as a greater variety in resources such as a range of paintbrushes and writing materials, resulted in the children making independent creative artwork. The paint display provoked the children to experiment with colour, mixing and creating different shades of their favourite colours. Ella was heard saying *"I'm an expert at making pinks"*, while Micheal concentrated until he made the perfect shade of blue *"Sonic is my favourite. This Blue is Sonic blue"*. This colour mixing interest was expanded through a provocation involving oil pastels, where children realised these two could mix and create new colours.

Children's stories emerged through their creations, particularly their paintings. Conor's description of his black marks as *"my sister didn't take her shoes off and got muck all over the new carpet"* and Grace's painting of *"me and my sister playing in the snow"* highlight how children can use the materials to communicate, described by Malaguzzi as their 'hundred languages' (Rinaldi, 2005; Vecchi, 2010). These findings align with Reggio Emilia's principle that regard the environment as the 'third teacher' (Gandini, 2012; Strong-Wilson and Ellis, 2007), where an aesthetically pleasing and flexible space can provoke creativity and collaboration. They also support Biermeier's (2015) suggestion that open-ended materials and a slower pace within the room leads to creative risks. As the children moved around the space and choose their own materials to use, Manera's (2022) views regarding flexible environments were highlighted. This connects to my main research question as redesigning the atelier space increased the influence of the REA and its principles in the setting.

5.2.2: Documentation involves reflection, collaboration and relational co-creation

Cycle two highlighted how documentation is not just a record of the day for the purposes of compliance with regulations, but a tool for reflection and collaboration (Azevedo et al., 2022; Dahlberg, 2012). This relates to my main research question regarding adopting Reggio inspired practices. Documentation was minimal and occurred on a surface level (Elden and Aras, 2024), where there was no deep connection between multiple sources over time and colleagues' input was excluded (Moss, 2016). A response from the questionnaire utilised in cycle one drew attention to the need for *"more communication between staff as to what is happening in the atelier"*. When floor books, wall displays, new curriculum documentation and QR digital codes were introduced in cycle two they addressed this issue. Children,

colleagues and parents were involved in the documentation process, becoming collaborators and co-creators (Barchi and Giudici, 2011; Moss, 2016; McNally and Slutsky, 2017; Strong-Wilson and Ellis, 2007) and addressing my third research question regarding increasing children's agency. Children narrated their friends' creations *"that's Ella's robot, she loves making them"* and created their own displays on walls.

By reflecting on the documentation colleagues acknowledged the differences in the number of creations that were made *"it's crazy to see how much we have done this year"*. Parents were included, particularly those that struggled to make it into the setting, by using QR codes to share the children's work, extending the documentation into their homes (West, 2018). These examples connect with Rinaldi's (2006) concept of documentation and a pedagogy of listening being interconnected. Rather than acting as a form of assessment alone (Alnervik, 2018), documentation became a source of reflection and a prompt for dialogue between educators, children and their families. This also supports Wien's (2011) notion that pedagogical documentation needs to be more than 'beautiful collages' and should hypothesise children's thinking.

5.2.3: Adapting Reggio Emilia's principles requires contextualisation, collaboration and ongoing reflection

The findings show that the REA can only inspire practice and cannot be replicated due the difference in cultural contexts (Dodd-Nufrio, 2011; Chicken, 2023), directly connecting to the main research question of this SSAR. The room was labelled 'the atelier' in an attempt to implement a Reggio inspired space, however, the children and educators, me included, continued to refer to the room as 'the art room'. One colleague expressed their concerns regarding the use of the term 'atelier' *"I feel like we all call it the art room, so it is hard to change to call it that...I don't think parents will get it really"*. Vecchi (2010) states an atelier is supposed to be viewed as more than an art room. This tension supports the argument of Chicken (2023) that superficially adopting elements of the REA risks misunderstandings regarding its principles. However, the name of the room did not dilute the many ways in which the space did become more Reggio inspired.

Similarly, I viewed Reggio inspired documentation as intimidating stating it reminded me of an art gallery (Wien, 2011). Through reflection and dialogue with critical friends, my confidence grew to attempt to document in a similar style. Wall panels were

created with children's words included and accessible, poetic language was used to describe the children's thinking. Using poetic language in this way added to the aesthetics of the space and added a feel of importance to the display. The process of creating this took time, supporting Wien's (2011) view that educators take a slow, relational approach to pedagogical documentation.

An increase in contributions to the space and documentation by colleagues throughout cycle two highlighted the importance of collaboration (Rinaldi, 2006). For instance, my colleague added to the children's discussion and experimentation with feathers one day by suggesting it was like they were camouflaged by the paint. This suggestion highlighted how their input took the children's lines of inquiry in a different direction to what I had been expecting, and maybe the input of colleagues can cause me to critically reflect upon my assumptions about what I think the children are experiencing. This reflects Rinaldi's (2006) belief in the importance of co-researcher roles and connects to the research question as Reggio inspired practice was enhanced.

5.3: Overall reflection

Both SSAR cycles have revealed many shifts in my practice, thought processes and pedagogical approach. I feel the last cycle resulted in a shift from the Kemmis and McTaggart model to McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead's reflective cycle (Figure 5.1), particularly in the second AR cycle.

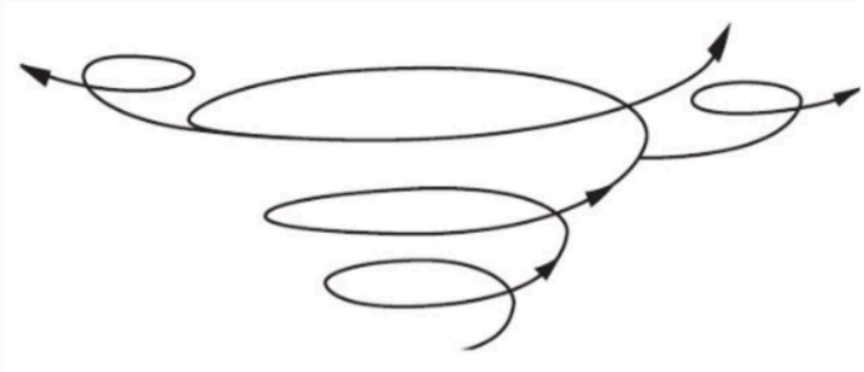

Figure 5.1: McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead (2010:42)

I found that SSAR is not linear in nature, and although it is recognised that the AR process can be a messy (Cook, 1998), McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead's cycle better represent the fact that one intervention may not be finished before other issues are addressed. Changes are ongoing, as is reflective practice. Reflection has created the greatest change in my teaching practice. Through collecting data for this study such as responses from the questionnaire, photographs, anecdotes from children, conversations with colleagues and critical friends I have realised that I reflect daily anyway, but it was critically reflecting upon this data that created change. Brookfield's (2017) notion that critical reflection can change educator's perspectives has led to an understanding of the need to view situations from multiple perspectives.

My research question involved implementing elements of the REA in our art area, or atelier. The space is more aesthetically pleasing, full of creativity and supports children's agency, however it was the pedagogy used in Reggio Emilia that has changed how I personally teach in the space. As previously stated, this space intended to support more adult directed activities. Now, through implementing a more Reggio Emilia inspired approach in the space, I needed to change how I taught. I value my relational pedagogical approach but had not realised it did not extend to the atelier. Through utilising a slow, relational pedagogy based on collaboration and listening my teaching practice has evolved alongside the physical space of the atelier.

5.4: My claim to knowledge

Through reflection, meta-reflection, a review of the relevant literature and the input of my critical friends I can confidently state I have developed my own living theory (Whitehead, 2006). Through two cycles of this SSAR, I have found that there is a link between children's agency and their creative processes. I have also discovered that implementing a new approach to practice in an Irish ECE setting is not as simple as replicating what is done elsewhere, in this case in Reggio Emilia. It takes time and a careful consideration of the cultural context that the setting, educators, children and their families are situated in (Dodd-Nufrio, 2011; Gandini, 2012). There is no checklist to implement the REA, however, inspiration can always be gathered to support the changes you feel needs to be made. I also feel I can claim that reflection can uncover living contradictions and beliefs (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006). Noticing a living contradiction was the catalyst for this whole SSAR. Also,

narrative reflection and meta-reflection uncovered deeply held beliefs, so deep that they unknowingly influenced my daily practice, values and the trajectory of my life.

5.5: Limitations of this research

A limitation of this SSAR was that it was small-scale and personal to my own journey. Should someone wish to replicate this and ask themselves the same research questions in a different but similar context, the research would likely produce different findings. However, my living theory could resonate with others and be applicable to individual practice, particularly regarding interrogating one's own 'living contradictions' as well as reflection upon any long-held beliefs and how these could be unknowingly impacting practice.

5.6: Disseminating my research

I have shared much of this research already with my colleagues; however, I will share the final report with them. Regarding parents, I will leave a copy of the printed report in the parent area for them to view and create a document with an overview of the findings that will be easily accessible to all. As a member of Early Childhood Ireland, I will share my research with them. They have a Reggio Inspired subdomain on their website and this may be of interest to them. They may also be interested in using this as part of their blog series. Once published on the MURAL webpage of the Maynooth University website, I will create a QR code linked to the document and place this in the setting for anyone that could be interested in the work.

5.7: Conclusion

This SSAR highlighted that contextualisation and reinterpretation of the Reggio Emilia principles mean it is possible to authentically be Reggio inspired in an Irish ECE setting. I uncovered living contradictions through critically reflecting on my own practice and used this as a starting point to create systematic changes. A redesigned atelier with new materials and resources increased children's agency and creativity, which was an aim of this study. While this research was small scale and focused primarily on my own practice, its findings highlight the value of reflective practice to improve practice. I hope to continuously participate in critical reflection, with the aim to uncover any other assumptions I may hold or values that I am not living to and ultimately further improve my practice.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Questionnaire for colleagues

1. On a scale of 1-5, where 1 is not at all and 5 is extremely familiar, how familiar are you with the purpose of the atelier in the Reggio Emilia approach?
2. What do you feel is the main purpose of an atelier?
3. On a scale of 1-5, where 1 is not at all and 5 is fully functions, do you think our art room in its current state functions as an atelier?
4. Do you have any ideas regarding how we could improve our art room so that it better aligns with the principles of the Reggio Emilia approach?
5. What kinds of documentation do you think should be used to showcase the children's work in a new Reggio Emilia inspired atelier?
6. On a scale of 1-5, where 1 is not at all and 5 is extremely visible, do you think the children's creations are visible in the service?
7. On a scale of 1-5, where 1 is not at all and 5 is daily, how often are loose parts, junk materials, or natural materials used by the children in the art room at present?
8. What are the strengths of the art room as it is right now?
9. What are the challenges you feel we face in the art room as it is right now?
10. We are going to redesign the art room to embody the principles of the Reggio Emilia approach and become an atelier. What changes would you make to better support creativity, agency, and collaboration?
11. On a scale of 1-5, where 1 is not at all and 5 is extremely well, to what extent do you feel the team works collaboratively to foster a creative and child-led environment?
12. Do you have opportunities to share or discuss ideas related to creativity and child-led approaches with colleagues?

Appendix B: Interview with manager

17/01/2025

Meeting with ***** regarding changes to atelier.

Suggested questions:

- What changes do you think we need to make to the space?
- What do you feel needs to be changed/ added to make the space more Reggio Inspired?
- What materials do you think we need?
- Why do you feel we should become more inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach?

Suggestions from the meeting:

- the shelves need to be turned
- Aesthetics of the room – add lights, look at baskets, discussed ideas for displaying materials such as colour coordinating the paint crayons etc.
- Start with door open and see who is drawn to the room more than others, what they are drawn to doing, set up provocations
- Inclusion, she said children with additional needs are known as 'children with additional rights' in Reggio Emilia and their interests take precedence over other children's
- Walls – "maybe if we put something up and think it is pretty they will too"
- Look for list of materials – toolkit for an atelier
- Look on adverts for an overhead projector
- Make a list of materials needed
- Essential oils in playdough- add real lavender
- Speaker in room for relaxing music – speechless activity?
- Change plastic boxes to baskets, tidy shelves
- Labels on shelves
- Discussion about ownership of the room, what could be added to the walls to encourage children's ownership, talked about stencils
- Lead to discussion about respecting the space, create a code of ethics with the children, involve children in ordering materials, make the list and bring to Aoife
- Give jobs such as washing the paintbrushes
- Documentation – how can we do it, not much wall space, reflexivity of the documentation – photos on table of playdough

- Jars for paint, pump bottles, colour cards on shelves
- Hessian on walls

Appendix C: Information sheets and consent forms

Maynooth University

Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas
Ollscoil Mhá Nuad

Information Sheet
Management

Who is this information sheet for?

This information sheet is for management and colleagues.

What is this Action Research Project about?

Teachers undertaking the Master of Education in the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education at Maynooth University, are required to conduct an action research project, examining an area of their own practice as a student teacher. This project will involve an analysis of the teacher's own practice. Data will be generated using observations, audio recordings, photographs, discussions with the other teachers and reflective journals. The teacher is then required to produce a thesis documenting this action research project.

What are the research questions?

- How can I increase the influence of the Reggio Emilia approach in our art area?
- What do I need to put in place to increase creativity in the art room?
- How can I support the team to better implement the Reggio Emilia approach to the arts?

What is the Reggio Emilia approach?

This approach to early childhood education originates in the Reggio Emilia area of Italy. It values active learning, and an emergent curriculum based on the interests of the children. Strong relationships between the service, children, families and the community are a priority. The children are viewed as having a 'hundred languages' to express their ideas, such as through art, music, construction and dramatic play.

What sorts of methods will be used?

Observation, audio recordings, transcriptions of the audio recordings, photographs, a questionnaire for colleagues, transcriptions of discussions with the other teachers and reflective journals. All data will be collected in a sensitive, non-stressful manner and as part of the children's preschool day.

Who else will be involved?

The study will be carried out by myself as part of the Master of Education course in the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education. The thesis will be submitted for assessment to the module leaders, Prof. Marie McLoughlin and Dr Annette J. Kearns and will be examined by the Department staff. The external examiners will also access the final thesis.

How will the data be protected?

The participants' real names will not be used, and all photographs will not contain any identifying information. Data will be kept in a password protected file and destroyed within the timeframe set out in the University guidelines.

What are you being asked to do?

You are being asked for your consent to permit me to undertake this study with my class. In all cases the data that is collected will be treated with the utmost confidentiality and the analysis will be reported anonymously. The data captured will only be used for the purpose of the research as part of the Master of Education in the Froebel Department, Maynooth University and will be destroyed in accordance with University guidelines. The final thesis may be published in the Maynooth University Research Archive Library at https://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/ and a copy will be available in the service.

Contact details: Student: Janis Power **E:** **janis.power.2020@mumail.ie**

Maynooth University
Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas
Ollscoil Mhá Nuad

Consent form

We have read the information provided in the attached letter and all of my questions have been answered. We agree to our service (insert service name) to participate in this study. We are aware that we will receive a copy of this consent form for our records. We are aware that participation in this research project is entirely voluntary, and that no negative consequences will occur should we decide NOT to participate, or should we withdraw consent for the service to participate in the research project whilst it is ongoing.

Name _____

Signature _____

Date _____

Name _____

Signature _____

Date _____

Maynooth University
Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas
Ollscoil Mhá Nuad

Information Sheet
Colleagues and Critical friends

Who is this information sheet for?

This information sheet is for colleagues and critical friends.

What is this Action Research Project about?

Teachers undertaking the Master of Education in the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education at Maynooth University, are required to conduct an action research project, examining an area of their own practice as a student teacher. This project will involve an analysis of the teacher's own practice. Data will be generated using observations, audio recordings, photographs, discussions with the other teachers and reflective journals. The teacher is then required to produce a thesis documenting this action research project.

What are the research questions?

- How can I increase the influence of the Reggio Emilia approach in our art area?
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- How can I support the team to better implement the Reggio Emilia approach to the arts?

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What sorts of methods will be used?

Observation, audio recordings, transcriptions of the audio recordings, photographs, transcriptions of discussions with critical friends and reflective journals. All data will be collected in a sensitive, non-stressful manner and as part of the children's preschool day.

Who else will be involved?

The study will be carried out by myself as part of the Master of Education course in the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education. The thesis will be submitted

for assessment to the module leaders, Prof. Marie McLoughlin and Dr Annette J. Kearns and will be examined by the Department staff. The external examiners will also access the final thesis.

How will the data be protected?

The participants' real names will not be used, and all photographs will not contain any identifying information. Data will be kept in a password protected file and destroyed within the timeframe set out in the University guidelines.

What are you being asked to do?

You are being asked for your consent to permit me to undertake this study with my class. In all cases the data that is collected will be treated with the utmost confidentiality and the analysis will be reported anonymously. The data captured will only be used for the purpose of the research as part of the Master of Education in the Froebel Department, Maynooth University and will be destroyed in accordance with University guidelines. The final thesis may be published in the Maynooth University Research Archive Library at https://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/ and a copy will be available in the service.

Contact details: Student: Janis Power **E:** **janis.power.2020@mumail.ie**

Maynooth University
Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas
Ollscoil Mhá Nuad

Consent form

I have read the information provided in the attached letter and all of my questions have been answered. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I am aware that I will receive a copy of this consent form for my information. I am aware that participation in this research project is entirely voluntary, and that no negative consequences will occur should I decide NOT to participate, or should I withdraw from the research project whilst it is ongoing.

Name _____

Signature _____

Date _____

Maynooth University
Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas
Ollscoil Mhá Nuad

Information Sheet
Parents and Guardians

Who is this information sheet for?

This information sheet is for parents and guardians.

What is this Action Research Project about?

Teachers undertaking the Master of Education in the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education at Maynooth University, are required to conduct an action research project, examining an area of their own practice as a student teacher. This project will involve an analysis of the teacher's own practice. Data will be generated using observations, audio recordings, photographs, discussions with the other teachers and reflective journals. The teacher is then required to produce a thesis documenting this action research project.

What are the research questions?

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What sorts of methods will be used?

Observation, audio recordings, transcriptions of the audio recordings, photographs, transcriptions of discussions with the other teachers and reflective journals. All data will be collected in a sensitive, non-stressful manner and as part of the children's preschool day.

Who else will be involved?

The study will be carried out by myself as part of the Master of Education course in the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education. The thesis will be submitted for assessment to the module leaders, Prof. Marie McLoughlin and Dr Annette J. Kearns and will be examined by the Department staff. The external examiners will also access the final thesis.

How will the data be protected?

The participants' real names will not be used, and all photographs will not contain any identifying information. Data will be kept in a password protected file and destroyed within the timeframe set out in the University guidelines.

What are you being asked to do?

You are being asked for your consent to permit me to undertake this study with my class. In all cases the data that is collected will be treated with the utmost confidentiality and the analysis will be reported anonymously. The data captured will only be used for the purpose of the research as part of the Master of Education in the Froebel Department, Maynooth University and will be destroyed in accordance with University guidelines. The final thesis may be published in the Maynooth University Research Archive Library at https://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/ and a copy will be available in the service.

Contact details: Janis Power **E: janis.power.2020@mumail.ie**

Maynooth University

Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas
Ollscoil Mhá Nuad

Dear Parent(s)/Guardian(s),

I am a student on the Master of Education programme at Maynooth University. As part of my degree, I am doing a research project. The research question is 'How can I increase the

influence of the Reggio Emilia approach in our art area?' and focus on children's creativity in the art room.

In order to do this, I intend to carry out research in (service name) by taking observations, audio recordings, photographs, having discussions with the other teachers and my own reflective journal.

The child's name and the name of the preschool will not be included in the thesis that I will write at the end of the research. Your child will be allowed to withdraw from the research process at any stage.

All information will be confidential, and information will be destroyed in a stated timeframe in accordance with the University guidelines. The correct guidelines will be complied with when carrying out this research. The research will not be carried out until approval is granted by the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education.

I would like to invite you and your child to give permission for him/her to take part in this project.

If you have any queries on any part of this research project, feel free to contact me by email at janis.power.2020@mumail.ie

Yours faithfully,
Janis Power

Maynooth University
Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas
Ollscoil Mhá Nuad

Parental/Guardian Consent Form

I have read the information provided in the attached letter and all of my questions have been answered. I voluntarily agree to the participation of my child in this study. I am aware that I will receive

a copy of this consent form for my information.

Parent / Guardian Signature _____

Parent / Guardian Signature _____

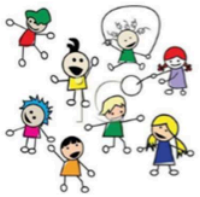
Date _____

Name of Child _____

Child's signature or mark _____

Date _____

Maynooth University
National University of Ireland Maynooth



Child's Assent Form

Child's name _____

I am trying to find out how I can support your creativity in the art room. I would like to watch and listen to you in the art room and write down some notes and take some photographs. Would you be ok with that? Circle your answer:

I have asked your parents/guardians to talk to you about this. If you have any questions, I would be happy to answer them. If you are happy with that, could you ask your parents/guardians to sign the form that I have sent home, and you can sign it too if you want?

If you change your mind after we start, that's ok too!

Thank you,
Janis

Appendix D: PDF document shared with parents

Look what we have been doing in the atelier!

Reggio Emilia is an area in Italy that is known worldwide for its approach to early education. In Reggio Emilia the preschools all have a separate art room called an 'atelier'. As we are lucky enough to have a separate room also in our service, we decided to be inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach to arts and create our own atelier.

The Reggio Emilia approach values 'process over product' art experiences. Focusing on process over product in children's art and craft is essential for fostering creativity, confidence, and authentic self-expression. Every child that creates in the atelier will have a truly individual piece of work rather than the templated pieces often seen in typical children's artwork. We know that they may not look as 'polished' but trust us the effort put into the final pieces and the learning that occurs is so much stronger Exploring the art materials encourages investigation and discovery. The children understand trial and error and being able to think outside the box.

Teacher Janis moved the room around and added lots of new materials, she wants us to be as independent as possible while we can freely express ourselves! We can now put our own paint in jars.....

and choose where we would like to paint, some of us like to paint our own pictures, some like to use the easel to make large paintings, and some of us like to paint boxes!

We are working out how to make colours with our paint by mixing them in the jars and understanding that white makes colours lighter and black will make them darker. We also got lots of new paintbrushes, some are bigger and some are really small. These new brushes have led to us adding lots of detail to our work.

We worked with oil and chalk pastels and realised they are very different to normal crayons. We can blend and layer the colours together to mix them just like paint mixes! Janis showed us that colours blend in nature as well, the colours on the flower petals were mixed like the pastels.

Janis added lots of our work to the walls and now it is like a real art gallery!

We cut out pictures of flowers from Lidl magazines and made cards for those we love. They may not seem perfect but lots of effort went into every piece and remember we love the process of creating our own individual pieces! Cutting the pieces ourselves is helping us practice our scissor skills which will be really important when we learn to write. We create these pieces with a little support from our teachers, but they never complete our work for us because we are capable and independent!

We make our playdough with Janis, and we choose what colour we want it to be ourselves. Sometimes we put different colours in to see what happens when we mix it in the bowl. Janis is encouraging us to explore the playdough a little differently by showing us techniques such as pinching, cutting and moulding the dough.

These techniques helped us to understand how to use clay. Clay is really messy but lots of fun. Janis set up our own tray with a piece of clay each and showed us how clay is different to playdough. We discovered it is harder to roll out flat that playdough, but easier the create pieces that we can let dry, paint and keep forever. We now have a little shelf in the atelier with or clay creations set up. Again, the process of exploring the clay is more important than making something so some children choose to use the clay as a form of messy play and that is perfectly fine!

Speaking of messy play, look at the slime we played with! Janis made taste safe slime form chia seeds, cornflour and water and it was so much fun to play with!