

Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education: Collaboration Laboratory, 2021-2022

Growing Within an Ecology of Practices: The First-Year Experiences of Teaching Artists

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Introduction

This research reveals two teaching artists' dynamic practices that emerged from participating in the Collaboration Laboratory (CoLab) professional development and coinciding classroom arts-based co-inquiry projects of Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education (CAPE). The researchers draw upon the 60-year-old Reggio Emilia Approach as one of the most widely recognized examples of sustainable partnerships with contemporary artists in an educational system with notable comparisons to CAPE. The Reggio Emilia Approach and CAPE disrupt educational systems that narrowly define curriculum by working with contemporary artists to co-create arts-based inquiries with teachers and students. The following research question guided the investigation: **How do the practices promoted in CAPE's CoLab professional development framework guide first-year CoLab teaching artists' co-construction of art inquiry with classroom teachers and students?**

Methodology and Data Analysis

The researchers illustrate temporality, context, and relationships within the two teaching artists' experiences using a three-dimensional narrative inquiry approach (O'Toole, 2018). The data analysis involved reviewing qualitative data from three sources: semi-structured virtual interviews with two CoLab teaching artists, online documentation on publicly shared CAPE websites, and CAPE's professional development (PD) framework presentations. Throughout the data analysis process, the researchers paid attention to the emerging language used by the teaching artists to describe the CoLab practices. The related aim was to reveal the teaching artists' professional growth during their first-year participation with CoLab, as it is woven into the unique stories and experiences based on their interactions with the classroom teachers, children, and CAPE's network.

Discussion and Summary

The researchers identified practices as the words, actions, and relations within the teaching artists' contemporary art practice, CoLab PD, the classroom arts-based inquiries, and the interconnections among these practices (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008). The investigation revealed that examples from experienced CAPE teaching teams contributed to the CoLab teaching artists' growth while also creating space for their unique artistic practices to contribute to classroom inquiries. Table 1 reflects the notable comparison between CAPE's CoLab collaborative PD model as a promotion of arts-based co-inquiry practices, which also adapted and evolved with the teaching artists' practices within the distinct classroom contexts (Kemmis, et al, 2012). While there are similarities in the CoLab teaching artists' classroom practices, distinctions were also present.

Table 1. Comparison of CAPE PD and CoLab Teaching Artists Practices

Overarching practices	CoLab PD Framework	TA1 Classroom practices	TA2 Classroom practices
Reciprocal relationships (teachers)	Co-Teaching promotes taking in wider perspectives, sharing resources, and parallel teaching.	Mutual respect, tag team, working the room, similar angles, freedom within the project, attuned to a rhythm	Recognizing each other's expertise, dividing the group, conversation, listening,
Reciprocal relationships (students)	In co-inquiry, identity, and unique artistic approaches. Investigations include the students' input, responses, and interpretations of the Big Idea.	Storytelling, freedom, listening, recognizing individual contributions to the group, tossing the ball back and forth, group conversations, comfortable talking,	Listening, and space for own essential decisions
Transcending boundaries	The Big Idea promotes creating an overarching, conceptual framework that spans the academic content area and art making and generates interest and curiosity. The Big Idea also promotes seeking relationships between individual interests and the school and/or community at large.	Improvisation and playing with languages and materials, home culture identities, thinking outside the box, expanding palette, identity through materials	Repetition, cold hard numbers, and poetic forms of measurement— combine those two, repetition, become all these other things, abstract concepts tangible and approachable
Embracing uncertainty	Big Idea inspires the inquiry question. The nature of inquiry questions is that they may change throughout the course of the project. They serve as a jumping-off point for other questions to branch off, a collaborative exploration of the unknown.	Improvisation, play, not focused on an end goal, but rather an openness.	Inquiry questions as guideposts. Establishing repetitive experiences and flexibility to allow for children's input. Really listening to what's emerging or what's happening in the room, engaged in the making process; not fishing for the outcome

Findings: An Ecology of Practices

An **ecology of practices** is a set of practices operating in relation to one another and existing within a particular context (Kemmis et al., 2012). In this study, the ecology of practices refers to how the CoLab professional development framework coexists and is cultivated in the classroom by the children, artists, and teachers. The practices are interconnected and interdependent within the CAPE network context. In this sense, an ecology of practices is created to sustain and allow for reciprocal knowledge to be recognized and for developing co-constructed experiences that significantly impact meaningful classroom arts inquiry projects.

This study demonstrates that CAPE's CoLab professional development model; the practices of the teaching artists; and the collaboration among the teaching artists, classroom teachers, and students exist within an ecology of practices. To describe the teaching artists' relationship to the classroom, the researchers used the Reggio Emilia Approach's interpretation of "reciprocal relationships" to describe the dynamic exchange among all participants. Through reciprocal relationships, there is a back-and-forth between individual thinking and group thinking and the concept that one learns about oneself and the world through interactions with others (Rinaldi, 2021). The Reggio Emilia Approach's unique ecology of practices aligns with CAPE's framework for classroom arts-based co-investigations, in which students play a critical role in influencing the direction of inquiry.

Conclusion

CAPE's CoLab partnerships supported not only the participants learning alongside each other but also the notion that the practices outlined in CAPE's professional development framework as living and adapting while remaining connected within the particulars of each classroom context. The CoLab teaching artists cultivated their professional growth through the dynamic nature of the exchanges and relationships among other teaching artists, classroom teachers, children, and materials.

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