



UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
MUSEUMS
& BOTANIC GARDEN

UCM Nursery in Residence Project Executive Summary

by Nicola Wallis and Kate Noble
The Fitzwilliam Museum

in consultation with the project team

Felicity Plent and Bronwen Richards
Cambridge University Botanic Garden

Gemma Pollard, Virginie Ghanime and Diana Church
ACE Nursery

July 2018

With thanks to staff at The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge University Botanic Garden as well as the staff, children and parents of ACE Nursery and to the children who participated in the Nursery in Residence:

Alanna, Amy, Barney, Charlie, Ewan, Harry, Lyla, Lucy & Jo

(children's names have been changed for reasons of confidentiality)



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

Executive Summary

*'Stand aside for a while and leave room for learning, observe what children do, and then, you have understood it well, perhaps teaching will be different from before.'*¹

Loris Malaguzzi (p82)



In October 2017, nine children from a Cambridge City Nursery spent five consecutive mornings 'In Residence' at The Fitzwilliam Museum and Cambridge University Botanic Garden. The project was co-created by a multi-disciplinary team of museum, garden and nursery practitioners. We hoped that the residency would give us the opportunity to, '*stand aside for a while and leave room for learning*' as Malaguzzi describes above. By working in partnership to create opportunities for young children to explore the museum and garden, we were interested in developing a better understanding of what the museum and garden offered to young learners and to share and develop good practice in both settings.

The end of project report explores the idea of research as practice through a series of detailed case studies. The case studies were created by drawing on data we collected during the course of the project which included photographs, art work, field notes, interviews and video footage. The report and case studies were written in consultation with the museum, garden and nursery practitioners and our methodology acknowledges the power of action research and 'enquiry through practice' (see Pringle, 2018)². Our research process has been a continual cycle of discussion, review, reflection and documentation whilst remaining mindful of our need to engage reflexively and acknowledge our pre-conceptions, bias and interests. We hope that by documenting our journey in this way, we can both share our learning with other practitioners and demonstrate the value of empirical practitioner led research of this kind.

¹ Malguzzi, L. (1998) *History, ideas, and basic philosophy: An interview with Lella Gandini* in Edwards, C., Gandini, L. and Forman, G. (Eds.) *The hundred languages of children: The Reggio Emilia approach - Advanced Reflections* (Ablex: Greenwich, CT) pp.49-97

² Pringle, E (2018) Enquiry Through Practice at Tate from [PRAM \(Practitioner Research in the Art Museum\)](#) Blog

What we found out

Young Children's Meaning Making in the Museum and Garden

- The case studies demonstrate that even the very youngest children care deeply about museum and garden collections. There are many examples within the data we collected of children forming deep and personal connections with the objects they encountered. They also demonstrated a sensitivity to issues of display, preservation and conservation.
- As the children developed their confidence over the course of the residency, they also revealed a growing sense of ownership and belonging³ within the museum and garden.
- Transitional objects such as learning journals, sketchbooks and small world toys enabled the children and practitioners to make links and build bridges between the different settings.
- The project enabled adult and child participants to work together to create knowledge about places, spaces, objects, and collections. Meanings were actively constructed and enacted in a variety of different ways, using bodies, movement, words, and touch.
- The project gave practitioners the space and time to allow children to respond to their experience in many different ways. However, it also highlighted the many contradictory messages that we give about freedom and control within the museum and garden environment.

Extending and Developing Professional Practice in the Different Settings

- The case studies enabled us to identify challenges and contradictions within our practice which might have otherwise gone unnoticed. This has highlighted the potential of detailed empirical research of this kind to help practitioners to acknowledge their blind spots.
- Although the focus of the project was on a very small group of children, the impact on the professional development of the practitioners and on museum and garden learning programmes promises a much wider impact. It will be interesting to reflect on this in the future.
- The nursery staff took ideas and approaches they observed as part of the residency back to their setting so that other children could experience and benefit from them. In the end of project interviews they reflected on how the extended time in new spaces refreshed their professional creativity.
- The process of discussing, reflecting and writing has taken over six months to complete. This is due to a variety of different factors, not least that our position as practitioner-researchers means that we have other projects and commitments running simultaneously. Our methodological framework required a collaborative approach at all stages of the project. This is necessarily time consuming. All members of the project team have been actively involved in commenting on and contributing to this written report. These discussions have played an important role in our developing understanding of practitioner research. It is important to consider the extended time necessary to facilitate this process when planning future collaborative research.

³ National Foundation for Educational Research (2015) *Using Quality Principles in work for, by and with Children and Young People: Results of a Pilot Study* <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/1567/acyq01.pdf>

- This project has enabled us to better understand and articulate the potential of collaborative practitioner-led research in informal learning contexts. This represents a significant area for future development.

Next Steps

1. **We would like to make the case for other practitioners and children to have the opportunity to undertake projects of this kind.** We were extremely privileged to have been given the opportunity to work with a small group of children in such an in depth and sustained way. Although we acknowledge the limitations of our project, the residency provided the project team with the opportunity to step back, to observe and to think deeply about our practice.
2. **Nursery practitioners began to incorporate some of the ideas and approaches that they had experienced and observed in the museum and garden into their practice back at the nursery.** One of our next steps at the University of Cambridge Museums will be to see how we can develop our training offer for practitioners from different settings building on our Initial Teacher Education and Continuing Professional Development programmes and extending our work with existing partners.
3. **Feedback from the nursery practitioners demonstrated how they had been inspired and refreshed by the project.** Sabbatical placements are one of the suggestions put forward in a recent government consultation (DfE, 2018)⁴ as to how to improve teachers' professional career development. This project points the way for the potential of gardens and cultural providers to support the education sector to develop a more creative, embedded and community led approach to professional and curriculum development.
4. **The case studies remind us that young children are capable and intelligent citizens who have important contributions to make to our shared spaces and places.** As museum and garden educators and practitioner researchers we are perhaps in a unique position in terms of our ability to witness and document the complex, multi-dimensional and creative learning of young children that happens in our shared spaces.
5. We hope that this project has helped to demonstrate that **young children have an important contribution to make as citizens now, not just as adults of the future.** Young children can and should be given opportunities to take an active and participatory role within our museums and collections. This extended residency, and the subsequent analysis by a multi-disciplinary team of practitioner-researchers, has been one way of both enabling children to contribute to and develop the ways in which we use collections right now. Our practitioner research project allowed us to take the time to really listen and understand their multiple voices and perspectives. In the business of our day to day work in the museum, garden and nursery this has been a rare and precious opportunity.

⁴ [Department for Education \(2018\) *Strengthening Qualified Teacher Status and Improving career progression for teachers*](#)