



Art in Early Childhood

TRACES of MEANING

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[Sporen van betekenis by Joke Den Haese](#)



To what extent does someone's gaze, opinion or frame of reference change, expand or deepen through encounters with art and culture? Can a tolerant and open-minded worldview be nourished through imagination? And how does this become visible in relation to working with children and their families?

ABSTRACT

This article reports on a practice-based, arts-based research project into the *artful in the everyday* within the Professional Bachelor programme *Pedagogy of the Young Child (PJK)* at Erasmus Brussels University of Applied Sciences and Arts. The programme uses an arts-based pedagogical approach, referred to

as *growing through art*, to support students in developing a deeper understanding of their own and children's cultural identities and to foster socio-culturally responsive interactions. Drawing on student testimonies, walking interviews, alumni postcards, visual ateliers and a focus group, the study explores how alumni remember their artful experiences in the programme, how these shape their current professional identities and practices, and how *growing through art* enriches arts-based, socio-culturally responsive pedagogical coaching. The findings suggest that art is experienced less as separate activities and more as a connective language and attitude that nurtures cultural awareness, empathy and a playful, open stance towards children and others.

INTRODUCTION

The Professional Bachelor programme *Pedagogy of the Young Child* (PJK) responds to a growing societal need for professionalisation within the broad field of childhood education and care. This sector refers to the entire landscape of provisions and services that support children and families before, during and after school hours, ranging from classic early childhood care to a wide variety of educational and leisure initiatives. Graduates take up coordinating and educational roles in diverse contexts and guide developmental processes and interactions around the child in a rapidly changing, culturally diverse society in which citizens are continually invited to reposition themselves in relation to cultural, religious and social difference (Broer et al., 2021).

The programme adopts a postmodern perspective on education and on the role of the pedagogical coach, in which language is understood as a central force in the construction of social reality. Knowledge and reality emerge primarily in interaction and dialogue; without language there is no shared experience or meaning. From this perspective, becoming a pedagogical coach means growing as both a person and a professional, through ongoing reflection on one's own positioning in relation to children, families and colleagues. Walking alongside people in their processes, rather than standing above them, is key (Gergen, 2009).

Within this perspective, the PJK programme distinguishes itself by its particular focus on professional identity formation and by emphasising the power of art and culture as connective tissue between children, families, the team and the wider social world. Throughout the curriculum, *growing through art* functions as a guiding concept that deliberately brings children and adults into interaction through artful processes and invites students to explore their own artistry.

Previous research has shown how engaging with art can make inner worlds visible, stimulate empathy and lead to unexpected connections (Den Haese, 2021).

Over the past decade, student portfolios and informal alumni encounters have repeatedly highlighted the impact of the programme's artistic modules on students' ways of seeing, relating and acting with children. These observations raised questions about how alumni, years after graduation, remember and give shape to *growing through art* in their (professional) lives.

In this article, I follow *traces of meaning* left by these artful encounters and ask:

Where is the artful located in the (professional) lives of PJK alumni, based on their experiences within the programme?

I first clarify the concept of *growing through art* within a broader arts-based and socio-culturally responsive perspective on pedagogy, then outline the arts-based research design, present the findings, and finally discuss their implications for pedagogical coaching and for thinking about art, democracy and society.

GROWING THROUGH ART

Within the PJK programme, engaging with art is translated into *artful action*, inspired, among others, by the Reggio Emilia concept of the hundred languages. Students are invited to develop an *artful attitude*: a way of being that combines curiosity, wonder and creative experimentation with attention to the multiple languages through which children and adults express themselves.

Dewey's description of art as a *state of mind* rather than an outer product resonates strongly with this focus: art becomes an attitude that brings inner experience and outer conditions into a more meaningful configuration (Read, 1967).

Through such artful practices, a sense of *intra-action* emerges: feeling part of an interconnected universe where exploration from curious wonder continually raises new questions. Unlike 'interaction' (where separate entities pre-exist and then act upon each other), *intra-action* describes how entities emerge through their relational entanglement. Agencies are not individual properties but arise dynamically within a larger phenomenon, constantly co-constituting each other (Barad, 2012).

Throughout the programme, students are challenged to grow through art and to further develop their own artistry. In a variety of ateliers they explore music, movement and image in interdisciplinary interplay, and they design a range of interactive encounters using the hundred languages as a source of inspiration. They visit exhibitions, reflect through art, and organise cultural and participatory moments to enter into dialogue and interaction with each other and with others—children, families, older adults and more. The aim is not so much to develop artistic mastery, but rather to stimulate broad awareness and creative engagement that naturally extends beyond the artistic discipline to other domains of life (Booth, 2024, p. 39). These other domains may be understood here as the professional contexts in which alumni eventually work, where they are expected to act flexibly, creatively, open-mindedly and in a polyphonic way.

These ideas are echoed in alumni narratives, where engaging with art is described as transformative for how they see children and themselves:

The experiences and insights during my studies did not only change my view of children, but also how I position myself in life. I now believe more strongly than ever in the power of connection, of listening and of allowing things to be. Although it has been almost four years since, that experience still lives in me, in how I work and in how I look at the world. (G)

METHODOLOGY

This practice-based study was grounded in an Arts-Based Research (ABR) approach, in which art and creativity are essential conditions. The research practices were not treated as separate components but approached through an integral lens. In collecting data, both 'word and image' were used as much as possible, in order not to focus solely on facts, but also to access information conveyed through non-discursive language.

Arts-Based Research extends beyond data collection by placing meaning-making at the heart of the research process. While meaning becomes visible through discursive language, it is deepened through the non-discursive language of the arts. In addition to the practical relevance of practice-based research, attention is therefore also given to aesthetic quality (Van Heijst, De Vos, & Keijnemans, 2019).

To collect data for this study, various overlapping and mutually reinforcing methods were used: student testimonies, literature, walking interviews, postcards, a visual atelier with children, a focus group, and a co-creative atelier with alumni, students and children.

At the outset of the study, alumni were invited (via email and social media) to send a postcard containing an image and a memory/quote about the role of the artful in their (professional) lives today, based on their memories of the programme. The research ran for 6 months; approximately 250 alumni were contacted, and 42 of them sent a postcard. Six of them also took part in a focus group afterwards, as well as in a co-creation moment with 6 children.

It was important to clearly define the concepts of art and artistry in order to analyse the data meaningfully. In literature, descriptions of key concepts were explored. I found meaningful descriptions in the work of Merlijn Twaalfhoven (2020), regarding artistic practice in everyday life. In his book 'Het is aan ons' (It's up to us), he advocates activating an 'artist's mindset'. This attitude stimulates us to approach the world with wonder, creativity, imagination and the courage to experiment. He assumes that this mindset is essential for addressing societal challenges and realising positive change. Twaalfhoven (2020) emphasises that artists do not only create beautiful things; they also find ways to open up obstructed systems, connect people and make new perspectives visible.

During walking interviews with 'critical friends', in-depth questions were asked about interpretations and meanings of artistry and the significance of this artist's mindset.

Several concepts were thus delineated and later used as codes for analysing the alumni postcards:

- *Memory*: looking back, being brought to reflection, cultural awareness, intergenerational, growing as a person (failing – healing)
- *Attitude*: innovative capacity, application and dissemination
- *Artful*: importance of material, hundred languages, metaphors, creativity
- *Action*: present-day practice in the field, professional action

This constellation of arts-based methods does not aim at representation but at depth, opening multiple entry points into alumni experiences of growing through art. By combining written words, spoken stories and visual, material explorations, the study invited alumni, students and children to speak in many of their hundred languages at once. The next part of this article listens more closely to these languages and traces where the artful now lives in alumni's professional worlds.

FINDINGS

This study pursues three interrelated aims. First, it explores how alumni of the Pedagogy of the Young Child programme remember and interpret their artful experiences during their studies. Second, it investigates how these experiences shape their current professional identities and everyday practices in diverse childhood education and care contexts. Third, it examines how the

concept of 'growing through art' can inform arts-based, socio-culturally responsive pedagogical coaching.

ALUMNI MEMORIES AND PERSONAL GROWTH

Alumni reflections consistently highlight both recognition of their programme experiences and profound personal growth. Looking back on artistic encounters serves a remedial function, enabling learning through reflection. As John Dewey argues, "If we do not reflect on our experiences, we do not learn from them" (as cited in Eric Booth, 2024, p. 83).

PJK was a moment of transition and growth. It taught me to think deeply about myself and others, to ask questions, to learn and to grow. (P)

PJK has left both an impression and an imprint on me! (...) The idea that you look through different windows and perceive different things is a valuable way to reflect on how coaching works. It is not only about the answers we find, but especially about discovering new insights and perspectives through conversation, through being together. (N)

Across data sources, responses overlapped in complexity: the artful resists simple definition, permeating memory, attitude, and action without clear boundaries. Notably, alumni rarely referenced specific atelier activities or art modules. Instead, they described a pervasive artful sensibility woven into their recollections.

PJK taught me that art is a means of connection—connection with children, with friends, with older adults, with colleagues, with partners, with nature, with myself. (C)

The hundred languages can be used to bring generations together and to give voice to those who are forgotten or overlooked. (A)

ARTFUL ATTITUDE AND PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

In alumni accounts, the artful manifests primarily in their everyday practice: in how they approach, observe, and act. A recurring theme is how the programme shaped their empathy and understanding of 'the other', continuing to influence their professional gaze.

The insights I gained there I still carry with me in who I am and how I look at the world. During the programme I was challenged to look beyond my own perspective, to learn to see through another person's lens. That question "What is it like for the other?" has profoundly changed my way of thinking. (Gh)

The themes of interculturality and diversity were particularly enriching for me. They broadened my view and strengthened my conviction that every culture and every child contributes something uniquely its own to the whole. (M)

During their studies, students engaged with logos–mythos thinking: alongside rational knowledge (logos), mythos recognises story, lived experience, and silence as legitimate meaning-making (Colpaert, 2007). For some, this art/mythos language has become their 'mother tongue'.

Art/mythos has become my mother tongue, even after PJK. (B)

Up to where both seas meet, seeking balance between the logos and mythos of life, where reason and imagination strengthen each other, intercultural conversations. (I)

These experiences resonate with an artful attitude that tolerates ambiguity: first observing, then interpreting (Booth, 2024). Art creates a safe space for play where the other becomes less threatening (Winnicott, 1971), while imagination fosters empathy and flexible, open responses – what Nussbaum (2016) terms narrative imagination. Alumni confirm this: creative thinking, metaphors, and mythos enable deliberate choices for themselves and others.

Choosing to study PJK sets you on a specific path. And that path adds colour. The creative thinking that was so strongly nurtured here, the many metaphors, the reflection, the mythos... all of these help you make considered choices. Small or large, choices concerning your own future. But also those of others, so that you can support them. (A)

CHILDREN AS MENTORS AND CO-CREATORS:

CHILDREN'S INSPIRATIONAL POWER AND THE ADULT INNER CHILD

Alumni postcards reveal alongside personal growth and cultural awareness a profound sense of wonder for children's worlds and deep admiration for the child as powerful equal. PJK alumni describe children not as objects of intervention but as inspirational equals who awaken the child within adults. Encounters with young children trigger childhood memories and rekindle natural curiosity, positioning children as mentors who teach through their very presence.

*The child within myself is the most beautiful part that has emerged so far and is still developing. (L)
When everything feels difficult and I look at you, things quickly become better. Thank you for what you give back (...) I look at your autonomy and I observe and learn from you every day (..) unique and beautiful to cherish, real diversity. (N)*

CHILDREN'S UNIQUE GAZE AND PERSPECTIVAL SHIFTS

Children possess a remarkable capacity to notice details adults overlook, creating meaning from small moments that radically shift perspectives:

Their honesty, their eye for detail, their unique gaze: children see more than the whole. They look for small details and, through this, bring new meanings. It shows how important small things are and how they can radically shift a perspective. (I)



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Alumni PJK 2016

This was one evening in our bedroom. The sun was shining in and my daughter was trying to catch dust particles she saw dancing in the beam of light. At first I did not see what she was doing until I paused in the moment. Only then did I also see those dust particles, and together we enjoyed a special moment of catching them just before going to sleep. (M)

WONDER, THE HUNDRED LANGUAGES, AND ADULT LEARNING

Caroline Pauwels (2019) calls for a renewed childlike gaze on the world, in which wonder serves as a means to push boundaries. While childhood curiosity is innate, adulthood introduces reflexive distance (Wolbert & Schinkel, 2021, p. 442). Alumni working with children actively seek to recapture this state through the Reggio Emilia hundred languages – recognizing children's expression through movement, colour, material, and silence beyond verbal communication:

The Reggio Emilia approach taught me to see the power of self-expression, to recognise and value the “hundred languages” of children. A child does not express themselves only in words but also through movement, colour, material, silence. It is up to us to see and hear these languages and respond to them. This requires attentiveness and letting go: attentiveness to the child’s world and letting go of the urge to always intervene or steer, not only in relation to what a child creates, but also in relation to what they are trying to tell us. (G)

This principle permeates the PJK programme, encouraging alumni to discover their own multiple languages while recognizing children's expressive potential.

CHILDREN AS DRIVERS OF ADULT ARTISTRY

Children motivate alumni to cultivate their own artistry, both ideologically and practically:

And if I am completely honest, then children are indeed a driving force for my artistry, but purely out of ideology (external motivation). I believe that children benefit from artistry and openness and hundred languages. And to be “real” about that with children, I find that I also need to know something about it and

to practice artistry. So, in order to be able to give this attention in my work with children, I actively work on my own artistry. (M)

'Hundred languages' is thinking "I cannot do this, I am not 'creative' first, and then discovering that everyone has their own area of strength. Hundred languages is learning to communicate without knowing each other's spoken language. Hundred languages is reflecting on your own actions without really having to use your head. Hundred languages, more than words. (S)

CO-CREATIVE ATELIER: CHILDREN AS PROCESS MENTORS

These insights culminated in a co-creative visual atelier where children mentored the process. As Edwards (1998) articulates, "The atelier is not a place; it is a way of being" – an aesthetic act where head, heart, and hands converge and materials speak their own language. Here children demonstrated fearless experimentation:



The child inspired me through her spontaneous and unselfconscious way of looking at the world. She dared to experiment without fear, to combine unexpected elements and was not at all afraid to try things out first. (I)

The programme has meant a great deal for my personal growth and identity, but it has also helped me rediscover the pleasure of spontaneous exploration and trying things out. Trying things and letting them happen because I enjoy it, not because others expect it from me. I will go where I want to go if I want it and when I want it; I decide how to color my own story. (T)

DISCUSSION - ART AS A WAY OF BEING

ARTFUL MEMORIES AS MEANING-MAKING NARRATIVES

Alumni memories in this study function less as objective reconstructions and more as dynamic meaning-making narratives. Van Heijst, De Vos, and Keinemans (2019) emphasize that recollection always involves interpretation: past experiences gain new significance when rearticulated within present contexts and future aspirations. This aligns with the arts-based methodology employed here, where alumni postcards, walking interviews, and visual ateliers invited precisely such interpretive processes. Booth (2024) suggests that reflecting on artistic experiences serves remedial and integrative functions, enabling professionals to weave fragmented insights into coherent professional identities (Dewey in Booth, 2024, p. 83). The complexity of overlapping codes – memory, attitude, artful action – mirrors this: the artful resists singular definition, permeating multiple dimensions of alumni experience simultaneously.

GROWING THROUGH ART AND CULTURAL AWARENESS

Growing through art emerges as a pathway to cultural awareness that transcends acquiring factual knowledge about 'others'. Alumni describe artful practices as invitations to critically narrate their own identities, creating space for multiple perspectives (Verhaeghe & Den Haese, 2020). This process echoes Nussbaum's (2016) idea of narrative imagination, the capacity to adopt another's viewpoint, and Winnicott's (1971) recognition that play creates safe spaces for encountering difference without threat. Becoming culturally aware involves questioning one's own identity as "the sum of our experiences," making space for the other through an empathic, not-knowing stance that enables open dialogue (Verhaeghe & Den Haese, 2020).

Alumni accounts illustrate this:

What is it like for the other? (Gh)

Every culture and every child contributes something uniquely its own" (M).

The PJK programme's logos–mythos framework further enriches this, positioning rational analysis (logos) alongside story, metaphor, and silence (mythos) as legitimate meaning-making modes (Colpaert, 2007). For alumni, art/mythos becomes 'mother tongue,' enabling nuanced navigation of cultural complexity.

INTERGENERATIONAL NATALITY AND CHILDREN'S MENTORSHIP

Children's unselfconscious gaze, noticing dust particles (M), experimenting fearlessly (I), models attentiveness adults must recapture. Caroline Pauwels (2021, p. 21) warns that without wonder "minds close." The co-creative atelier embodied this: children mentored adults, demonstrating Edwards' (1998) insight that "the atelier is not a place; it is a way of being". This resonates with Hannah Arendt's (2009) '*natalità*', humanity's capacity to initiate novelty: "Humans... are not born in order to die but in order to begin" (Arendt in Hermsen, 2017, p. 84). Alumni position children not as care recipients but as mentors whose *hundred languages* challenge adult certainties (Edwards et al., 1998).

Alison Gopnik (2009) and Eric Booth (2024) illuminate this: children's brains practice imagination through fearless experimentation and failure, requiring courage over virtuosity. Together, these perspectives frame PJK alumni as intergenerational co-creators, sustaining wonder and natality across generations.

THE POWER OF SMALL THINGS AND DEMOCRATIC IMAGINATION

Alumni consistently highlight children's capacity to create meaning from "little things" – overlooked details that shift fundamental perspectives. This micro-level attentiveness carries profound democratic implications. David van Reybrouck (2025), 'Denker der Nederlanden', advocates 'thinking far' through hands-on action: small acts of resistance that cumulatively open new possibilities. Christophe Busch (2021) similarly argues democracy thrives through civil disobedience enacted via modest individual initiatives.

PJK alumni embody this democratic imagination in daily practice:

Every day we explore children's languages together – collages, photos, drawings; we dance to Miriam Makeba and do yoga. We have a lot of fun! (W)

Children inspire me to explore The Art in the Little Things. (Y)

Such practices instantiate Maxine Greene's (1995) social imagination – the capacity to envision "things as if they could be otherwise" – and align with civic imagination theory, where artistic processes cultivate agency for democratic transformation (Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2021). Art here functions less as mastered technique than universal language: Bach moves without musical literacy; Giacometti touches universally; silence communicates profoundly. As N. articulated during walking interviews, "Artful is a way of living", a relational orientation countering routine through persistent wonder:

Finding wonder in the Other, in the everyday... as a way to counter taken-for-grantedness (Y).

PJK alumni emerge not as ornamental artists but as imaginatively responsible professionals embodying Booth's (2024) teaching artist ethos, humanizing communication while sustaining democratic vitality through everyday artful encounters.

CLOSING REMARKS

Does Susan Sontag (1966) have a point when she writes that true art has the capacity to make us uneasy, and that a work of art should be left in peace because reducing it to its content and then interpreting that content does injustice to the work? I wonder whether the Pjk programme predominantly interprets content? Or is it precisely the opposite: daring to think from the incongruous and allowing the friction this provokes, precisely because of the power of doubt and nuance?

This study reinforces my conviction that art education transcends teaching artistic skills: it cultivates an *artful way of being* that humanises communication, sustains critical and imaginative thinking, and invites shared responsibility for our common world. As an artist, I see my role as engaging in what Arendt (1958) calls the *vita activa*: creating spaces where children and adults, together, can begin anew and shape more just, imaginative ways of living together.

For me, this encompasses children as inspiration, the power of non-verbal expression, critical imagination that questions us-them divides, hope made tangible in the here-and-now, and wonder that finds beauty in everyday life, all embodied through art.

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