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References
In the first volume of the final research and evaluation report on the Serpentine Education Programme, curated by the education team, we presented an executive summary that set out findings, contexts and synoptic descriptions of individual projects observed, along with recommendations for sustainability and future steps. This is the second volume of the research and evaluation report in which a series of extended ethnographic case studies are presented. Prefacing the case studies is a section outlining themes, drawing on references to literature. In keeping with the ethnographic approach to research and evaluation outlined above, the case studies are presented as analytical narratives that are descriptive in which analysis is embedded. Our intention is to convey to the reader something more detailed of the flavour of each of the commissioned projects and some of the outcomes that we observed. While this is unusual for an evaluation report it seems to us the most accurate way of reporting what we saw and participated in. While it might have been possible to reduce these cases to lists of bullet points, our view was, and remains, that the practices of the work should be made as visible as possible.

This section of the report concludes with a short essay on care and curation.
‘Rights to the city’ is a core theme that runs through Serpentine Galleries’ community-based education programme. Walls in the city are clearly literal entities, encircling, containing and perhaps constraining. But they are metaphorical, too, representing barriers that have social and cultural faces. Centred in and around the Church Street locality, the education programme engages with its culturally and ethnically diverse population through children and young people. There is a strong desire to treat people in the community as collaborators, involving them in making decisions about the places and spaces in which they work and live. In this way, the programme is concerned with people’s access to resources, cultural and material, alongside individual, social and cultural development.

Education curators draw some inspiration and impetus for commissioning artists to work on projects with children and young people from engaging with the writing of Colin Ward. In his book, *The Child in the City*, first published in the late 1970s, Ward was interested ‘The City as a Resource’, writing that the ‘city itself is an environmental education’—‘learning through the city’, ‘about the city’, and crucially learning as children’s agency to ‘use the city’, ‘to control … or to change the city’ (Ward, 152). Supporting a view of children’s agency, he quotes the headteacher Chris Rosling on children’s ‘realisation that they can actively play a part in shaping their surroundings, that what they say about where and how they live will be listened to and that the key to their future lies in their own awareness’ (159).

In an afterword to a later edition of *The Child in the City* in 1990, Ward wrote presciently and critically of the ‘demoralisation of the public education industry’ which he asserts has ‘nothing to do with the needs of children’, and of the effects of parental poverty which altogether may mean that city children will be likely to ‘make less use of the urban environment than their predecessors’ (Ward, 190).

Nearly 30 years later in parts of London such as the Church Street locality where the population experiences reduced socio-economic conditions and restricted opportunities for political representation, Ward’s prophecy appears to have increased validity. Ward went on to ask, ‘Are there redeeming features in other aspects of city children’s lives?’, and answers his own question with the assertion that ‘There is some reason to assume that today’s city children make less use of the urban environment than their predecessors’ (1990, 190).

The work of Bahbak Hashemi-Nezhad in 2017 was a positive illustration of how work on Changing Play engages directly with issues of rights to the city. Questions guiding his project—‘Where are the spaces for children in the city?’ and ‘What are the physical and imaginative qualities of a play space?’—led him to explore a bare and rather arid open area at the base of a tower-block with children. The work was demonstrably driven by a desire to open up the resources of the city to a group of nursery children, and the desire of many staff at the Portman Centre to understand how the resources of place might support the children’s
play and learning. Ongoing at the time of writing, Sam Curtis is similarly interested in taking a small group of children, some of whom have special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), out of the nursery to explore the resources of the city. His questions focus on what child-led walks can reveal of their experiences and their relationship to the city, what can be learned from listening to the children in restructuring the city, and how walks through the city can help thinking about how children manage risks. Both Bahbak’s and Sam’s work can be seen to want to open up children’s sense of agency and autonomy in relation urban environments.

Migrations and movements

Given current conditions of ‘austerity’ and strictures that have been in place since 2010, the work of the Serpentine Offsite Education Programme is pressing. This is particularly evident in an area of London in which people, children and young people of immigrant families disproportionately experience first-hand the effects of austerity policies in terms of access to employment, housing, education, arts and cultural resources. It is a view supported by recent work by social geographers Doreen Massey (2007) and Danny Dorling (2015) who draw on evidence demonstrating an increasing tendency toward reduced access to the resources of London for people on lower incomes and from diverse minority groups. This is despite evidence that the very social, cultural and economic diversity of the city represented in localities such as the Church Street area have made major contributions to its vibrancy.

An effect of austerity and the pressure on the lives of members of the community and parents of children at the Portman Centre surfaced in discussion during Adelita Husni-Bey’s Changing Play project. In one of these sessions staff members and parents present talked about how families were being moved out of the locality in north Westminster to outlying areas of London due to rent caps. Wanting to maintain their family contacts, friendships and contact with, and support from, the Portman Early Childhood Centre, family members were having to travel long distances into the centre of the city, clearly a challenge to people who are often subsisting on low incomes.

Here there is evidence that supports Dorling’s analysis of pressures and movements on city populations, particularly for young families on low incomes who are often being housed in temporary accommodation and are subsequently being moved out to areas where there is less of a premium on housing and rents are lower. There continues to be a trend towards placing pressure on diverse populations in inner cities, more homogenisation of populations towards those with higher incomes and, with this trend, challenges to those on lower incomes who support services such as those that work in early years care. At the same time, cuts associated with austerity policies have resulted in reduced staffing levels in early childhood centres, along with fewer resources to support families or to take children and their parents on trips in and around London.

Children, Young People and Schooling

The education team’s aspiration is for continuity and development and to encourage and support co-research with community groups. It is through developing and sustaining relationships with schools that a way into working with the wider community could be realised. The idea was to begin by building networks locally and from this base to build nationally by developing resources with children, young people, parents and educators alongside artists that can be published online and in hard-copy formats.

The education team acknowledged that this would be challenging because of the time required to build up networks. The Serpentine develops a programme, but it was not for the Serpentine Galleries to develop proposals for arts projects, but for commissioned artists to co-develop them after spending time in the specific context, having conversations with people, and building familiarity with the community and its values. A main idea behind curating arts projects in the community with members of the community having a say and input, steering direction of the work, is to work with children and young people and to promote changes they would like to see. Change is brought about in Alex Thorp’s view by engaging collectively and actively in devising research questions and programmes, involving staff, parents and wider members of the community, alongside the artists, in reflections on the course of projects and the changes that participants and collaborators want to bring about. In this way, research processes leading to change are seen as intrinsic to the arts projects run by the Serpentine’s education team.1 It is a model of reflective practice—reflection on and in practice—that was prevalent and influential in education practice in the 1990s, drawing particularly from the work of Donald Schön (Schön, 1991).

The relationship with staff at the Portman Early Childhood Centre in the various projects of Changing Play is a particularly successful example of this reflective, research-based way of working with a centre and its staff. For Jo White, the Head of the Portman Centre, the work with the Serpentine, commissioned artists and education curators presents an opportunity to reflect critically and to instigate changes through that reflection. Discussing work with the Serpentine on the Changing Play project with Albert Potrony, Jo noted how the reflective work encouraged by the Serpentine project has appeared to give her staff members an opportunity to develop a critically reflective voice:

I remember sitting with the whole staff and Albert as we were devising those questions and those cards and I think we’ve probably achieved more than most schools, but there have always been people who would always be very tentative about airing their views. And what I think has been powerful has been people who maybe don’t agree with something

1 From initial discussion with Alex Thorp, Education Curator and Assistant Education Curator, Ben Messih, 9 June 2016
that’s happened are now able to say it. Now, we may or may not accept that and change what we do.

She went on to talk about trying out different approaches to arranging the work and play of the nursery:

It almost gives us permission to try something radical. I can remember, I think it was the shapes, almost the first project we did. And we had a very cluttered room, I remember. Well, not very, but it was too cluttered. So, what we did, in order for that to work, we removed huge amounts of furniture. And we’ve never replaced it. Because now we have an understanding about space that is different than it was.²

In many respects, the ‘permission to try something radical’ can currently be seen as something quite special in the world of education and schooling. Despite the flexibility that Head of Centre Jo noted, there are pressures from centralised government policy on curriculum and pedagogical practices to make the children ‘school-ready’ when they leave the nursery. The question of the meaning of school readiness is one that was a concern of Albert Potrony’s Changing Play project. He instead wanted to ask, ‘How can free play be supported?’ and then ‘How could we prepare primary schools to become child-ready?’ The focus was not one that Albert began with—it developed over time through conversations with the Portman Centre staff as it emerged that some children were being failed in school because of the impositions of an increasingly prescriptive curriculum and the criteria through which assessments of schools are based on children’s progress.

The ‘schoolification’ of early childhood education has been prevalent in recent years, resulting in a loss of confidence in child- and play-centred approaches to early childhood educational practice. In a review of policy on early childhood education for the past 20 years, educationalist Peter Moss has noted the effects of ‘an emphasis on markets and individual choice ... combined with the development of strong central control’ on early childhood education that has skewed its organisation and purposes (Moss, 2014, 356). Instead, early childhood education has missed the opportunity to become more ‘integrated and multipurpose’ and to provide more ‘democratic and multipurpose’ centres of early childhood education (ibid, 357). A proponent of ‘Mosaic’, a child-centred approach to research that emphasises the young child’s capacity for communicating meaning, Moss is critical of the move away from child-centredness in early childhood education (Clark and Moss, 2011).

The emphasis on markets and choice in the context of a more centralised educational policy, together with its emphasis on coherence and homogeneity, have also been seen as a more traditional academic-centred curriculum for secondary education, has also had impact on primary and secondary schooling. In primary schools the implementation of high-stakes standardised tests (Standard Assessment Tests, or SATs) has had a tendency to put a squeeze on more creative approaches and arts subjects, particularly in the final Year 6 curriculum. For the Serpentine’s Moving Up project with students in Year 6 on primary/secondary transfer, it has had the effect of squeezing the project into a tight space at the very end of the school year. Although the case study on Moving Up shows that it was valued by students and teachers at Gateway Academy, it has proved challenging for the education curation team at the Serpentine Galleries to sustain and develop the project.

The two-way pull of liberalisation and centralisation Moss identifies in early childhood education policy applies as well to the ‘academisation’ of secondary schooling (Ball, 2009), affecting the context of the operation of the Youth Forum project. Many of the young people appear to have been identified for the project because they present some challenges to the standardisation and formality of school academic cultures.

On another view, those students who elect to be on the project do so because of the limitation placed on them not to select arts subjects for public examinations at 16+. In both cases, there appear to be forces of normalisation at work in which there is less tolerance or ‘play’ within a system for the expression of difference, and in which the arts are likely to be viewed as fulfilling a remedial function. It is, of course, an interpretative perspective, given some support when the group observed as part of the research and evaluation of the Youth Forum project followed up their out-of-school placement with a session back in school. Although many of the Youth Forum group tried their best to involve their peers in a follow-up workshop in school, the session appeared stilted and constrained in the school setting and was perceived as somewhat dispiriting experience.

Teaching and Learning

It is clear from observation and from talking with education curators, staff at the schools and centres with whom the Serpentine’s education team work, and artists, that teaching and learning in and through engagement in arts practices are key in the work of their projects. There was clear evidence from the research of how theories of learning and teaching impacted on practices promoted in the work of the Serpentine’s education team.

In the work of Changing Play with young children, for example, education curator Alex Thorp draws explicitly on child-centred theory. Artist Albert Potrony was introduced to the work of architect, planner and academic Simon Nicholson, particularly his article ‘Loose Parts’, in which he asserted that:

In early childhood, there is no important difference between play and work, art and science, recreation and education—the classifications normally applied by adults to a child’s environment: education is recreation, and vice versa (Nicholson, 2009, 12).

Principles of child-led activity touched on this article,
strengthened by approaches drawn from the educational principles of early schooling from Malaguzzi in Reggio Emilia (Rinaldi, 2001), through which listening to children is seen as a ‘radical act’, became increasingly significant in the way that Albert’s project developed.

Theories of learning and development drawing from the work of Russian psychologist and philosopher of learning Lev Vygotsky were also seen to be influential in the thinking and practices of the curatorial team. As well as placing stress on the value of art and learning (Vygotsky, 1971), Vygotsky also promoted the importance of play in children’s early development (Vygotsky, 1978). In the concept of the ‘zone of proximal (or next) development’ (ZPD), he emphasised how the social and cultural aspects of learning leads development through the participation of more experienced others. In the context of Changing Play projects, for example, the involvement of an artist such as Albert alongside the curators was key in the children’s development of the project. At the same time cultural activities and objects such as play and the arts are also seen to serve learning and development.

The social and collaborative aspects of learning can be seen to apply not only to small children, of course, but also to young people and to artists. Commenting on her work with parents and children, for example, artist Jasleen Kaur commented on the role of Alex Thorp in her own learning: ‘Alex is an amazing teacher—she wants it to come from you. She provides a scaffold and is very tactful.’

Elaborating on Vygotsky’s ideas in recent years, researchers and teachers have stressed the importance on placing learners’ experiences at the centre of practice, drawing on and building upon their own ‘funds of knowledge’ (Moll, 2013).

Curation, dialogue and mediation

Intrinsically connected both with learning in the social and cultural context of education is the role of dialogue and mediation. As in Vygotsky’s theories, learning can be seen to be enhanced through the mediation of cultural activities of play and art, but also through the mediating role of more experienced others. Notions and practices of dialogue and mediation were seen in the research to be central in the work of curators in exercising their curatorial role. Head of the Portman Early Childhood Centre Jo White, an organisation with which the education curators have worked hard at building and sustaining a relationship, commented on the role of education curator in particular:

You know who the most important person has been? Alex. Because she calms the artists’ anxiety … She’s always there, whichever artist is there. She’s beginning to understand (laughs), the poor woman, the way we think. We have developed a very good friendship, really. And so, whatever the artist we have complete trust, I think … She keeps you informed. So, that conduit, I think is really important.

Artists also commented on the significant role of the curators and the impact that it had on their way of working. Adam James commented on the curatorial relationship in his work on the Moving Up project:

I’ve never worked with a curator in this sort of way. When I’ve made things before, I’ve been left much more to my own devices. There’s not been a need before to pin down objectives and outcomes … Alex was great with that.

After his project on Changing Play, Albert Potrony reflected on how discussions with education curators helped him, whilst leaving him room to pursue his own route:

What’s been brilliant working with Alex and Ben is they allowed for a lot of space and held back from directing what it was about.

Albert’s views on the role of dialogue in helping him develop his project with the children of the nursery extended beyond his work with education curators:

Conversations with staff following sessions were very useful and led me to provide fewer materials, make holes in some [materials], to bring in mirrors and to try taking all the materials outside … Dialogue between the sessions with staff, with materials, with the children via the materials. Then I could reassess. We had amazing conversations.

Arts and Participation

In times when public funds for arts work are limited, especially under current conditions of ‘austerity’ imposed after the financial crisis in 2008, the continuation of support for community-based arts projects galleries such as the Serpentine is more necessary than ever.

The French philosopher Jacques Rancière has coined the term ‘distribution of the sensible’ in relation to audiences and spectators (Rancière, 2009). The concept of public participation in arts projects...
has a tradition that significantly includes the work of Bertolt Brecht in the first part of the twentieth century (Brecht, 1978) and extends through the century into the community arts movements of the 1960s and ‘70s (Bishop, 2012) and more recent ideas on dialogic art (Kester, 2011).

It is clear from the evidence of observation and discussions with artists commissioned on the various projects of the education programme that they are committed to engaging in participatory arts projects. The immersive aspects and the community base of the Serpentine Education Programme makes the Serpentine one of the few galleries in London to develop public engagement and to extend the traditional boundaries of the gallery. Its operation in north Westminster, particularly in its emphasis on working with children and young people as a way of engaging with the wider community, is clearly one of the means of serving the civic responsibility of galleries to be as engaging and inclusive as is possible.

Writing on the aesthetics of participation, applied theatre practitioner and academic Colette Conroy affirms that ‘a process of assuring … creative autonomy for all participants is a central and abiding concern of all forms of applied and social arts work’ (Conroy, 2015, 4). Drawing from writings of Jacques Rancière and Raymond Williams, she goes on to identify their common concern with ways in which they ‘saw a coherent relationship between aesthetic form and social and political form’, and that each in their own way emphasise that ‘aesthetic norms are an example of a series of cultural norms [that are] general factors in social life and help to create our attitudes to reality’ (ibid, 8).
Albert Potrony, ‘Play as Radical Practice’, May 2016–July 2018

The artist commissioned for the project, Albert Potrony, works with groups to produce films, sound works, collaborative constructed environments, or installations, and sees his work as being ‘participatory’ and ‘a socially engaged practice’. He had previously worked with young children, although not as young as nursery children.

For Changing Play, he provided a range of materials and objects, some from the Scrap Project, but others bought from builders’ merchants, including: sheets of foam (shaped and with holes cut in), corrugated PVC sheeting, nylon cord, clips, reflective insulating material, tube foam insulation, large sheets of corrugated card, PVC mirror shapes, and LED lamps (that fitted into holes cut in foam).

Materials chosen and adapted by the artist provided an enriched play environment, augmenting the resources of the Portman Early Childhood Centre to stimulate a range of imaginative play activities. The choices presented—children could choose if, when and how they wanted to engage in play with materials—and the openness of the play environment in the richness of materials offered afforded many opportunities for individual and social development for the children. Benefits were perceived by the artist, the Children’s Centre staff, the institution as a whole, and Serpentine’s Education curators. In the second phase of the project Albert developed an early years’ atelier that extended into the surrounding park and was free and open to local nurseries and primary schools at the Serpentine Gallery. He produced a range of materials in the form of a pack—Play as Radical Practice—for use by other artists, curators and early childhood educators, supporting early years’ educators to develop strong relationships with children and promoting free play activities for the state school system.

Albert’s project as part of Changing Play was sampled and visited by researcher, Anton Franks, for three sessions with the children and staff at the Portman and for a workshop with early years professionals and artists two years later. In the following, field notes form the basis and detail of a case study.
Child 1: He's making it rain.
Child 2: He's making a prison.
Albert: One, two, three, we can start.

He goes into a large flat cardboard box and draws out circular mirrors on Perspex and distributes them. Children commence play immediately.

Albert: Look at that, you start already customizing.
There are plastic clips that children attach to their clothes and to sheets of foam, improvising costumes.

Albert: What are those? What are they for?
Child: Power Rangers!

He has a foam strip that he holds laterally across his chest and flaps it up and down, like wings.

Albert: He was doing that last time.
He then holds the strip of foam to his nose
Child: It's a nose. It's a snake. It's a snail.

"It is evidence of imagination in action that, through processes of time and maturation, is internalised."
(Vygotsky, 1978a)

Another boy takes two rectangles of foam with holes cut towards one end and pokes his arms through each one.

Alex has been tied up with cord by a couple of children and had foam sheets positioned around her. In another space, the teacher has been tied up with cord, too, by three children with others coming and going. She has sheets of foam inserted into her clothes. More cord is used to tie her up in a web and keep the foam in position. The children are intent and concentrated. She looks a little like an angular Michelin person.

There are waves of activity, with children ebbing and flowing, appearing and disappearing into inside spaces quite freely.

One boy sits astride a triangular shaped piece of foam. There's a hole near one acute angle of the piece, through which the boy has fed a foam tube that he's doubled up to serve as 'handle-bars'. He announces that it's a Power Ranger bike.

Albert: That's the thing at the moment—every week there's something that catches on…

Two other children, a boy and a girl, have joined the Power Ranger bike gang. They've fixed clips to various parts of the triangle.

Another child approaches, slowly paddling his triangular foam 'wings' and says, 'I'm a zombie!'

Alex says that, after the session last week, they had had a one-hour conversation with staff. Their point had been to allow the children to lead the play and to try to avoid imposing adult preoccupations on the children.
After the session, Albert, Alex, Ben and I join an end-of-day meeting with nursery staff.

One of the teachers has a picture on her iPad she’s showing around of two mirror circles, one smaller overlapping a larger circle. They are laid on the ground and reflect the trees above, sun dappling through the leaves. It’s a lovely image. The teacher observes that it is interesting in reflections.

Other members of staff, teachers and assistants, gather and talk about the children’s activities with materials. Some like licking metal surfaces, another is interested in maths and ‘likes arranging amazing patterns and shapes.’

As more staff gather, people sit around tables and the conversation turns on how children behave differently inside and outside.

Albert has noticed that the children use different materials outside than they did when they were inside during the previous session. He’s been changing the sizes of different materials. He thinks that the children appear to have had more ‘ownership’ over the materials this week. Their action was very ‘physical’ and there was not so much ‘violence’ this week.

Jo, the head of the early childhood centre has been listening and speaks up, ‘I think that violence is quite a strong word to use about four- and five-year-olds.’ The staff talk about ‘play-fighting’ and ‘rough play’. ‘Perhaps we need video. We’re missing stuff.’ They want to try ‘to capture patterns of activity’.

Albert ends up by wondering about whether they should participate or try to intervene at all, or just to stand back and watch.

11 May 2016

A week later, there are about 10 children out in the yard. Members of nursery staff come and go, keeping an eye out.

There are fewer materials laid out in the yard this week. There are four foam triangle shapes with holes cut into them that some of the children pick up and immediately mount their Power Rangers bikes again.

The idea of video-recording has been picked up by Alex, Ben and Albert and this week they’re equipped with Go-Pros (small high-definition video cameras) that can be strapped to the children’s chests. Ben asks children if they want the Go-Pros attached and gets willing volunteers. He then encourages them to go and play.

In previous sessions Albert has been documenting the sessions, taking still images of children playing with the materials. This week, he comes with some images printed out on A4 sheets. He’s arranged them into sets, each of which feature the play of one particular child, and says that he plans to take them out one at a time. The children will be encouraged to choose their favourite images and ‘tell the story of what’s going on.’ He’s interested in stimulating ‘multiple narratives’, taking children out in subsequent weeks to chart the ‘development’, or ‘evolution’, of their play. He takes the children to the carpet area of the nursery classroom where children come to listen to stories their teachers read to them.

Albert is sitting on a carpet inside, with Mahek and some of the photos he’s taken. Mahek has had a Go-Pro attached to her, and she is looking at a picture with interest.

Mahek:  I was stuck
Albert:  What’s the story?
Mahek: I put my head inside that
Albert:  How did it feel inside?
Mahek:  Quite warm
Albert:  Oh, quite warm
Mahek:  Hot...

There are fewer children there today as some children have been taken on a trip out to a local park. A teacher comments about how interesting it is with fewer children—it changes the ‘dynamic’ of the play. There’s a feeling that there was more extended activity this afternoon and less flitting between different materials and activities. It had been raining and this was the first clear day when they could venture into the outside play area. Children continued play activity from a session before the weekend and the staff found this interesting—it appears that they have previously underestimated the children’s capacity to retain memories of play over time. Albert notes that there was some ‘elaborate’ activities going on in today’s session. They talk about the effect of having fewer materials this week and one of the teachers suggests that they follow this example and put out fewer things for the children to play with.

Jo:  We want to mirror their activities. We need to think about resources and the role of adults.
Teacher:  We can put on entertainment, but to let themselves is really nice … We should do something that everyone can join in.
Jo:  We should entice kids to choose things they wouldn’t use for themselves.

Alex asks Albert how the storytelling went. He’s recorded the session and needs to review it. But he comments:

Albert:  I need to learn not to say too much … I’m trying not to direct too much … When I’m quiet it worked the best…Jo talks about the ‘giving space and time’ to the children, saying ‘we often respond too quickly.’ Alex says that some of the footage from the Go-Pros is lovely. Albert wants to listen to the children’s stories, to review some of the Go-Pro footage, and then to formulate a project around some questions. He wonders whether it would be best to work with parents or with staff, stuff that correlates with staff interests.”
It is Albert’s last session working with the children at the Portman Centre. Before the session, Albert and Alex have a conversation in which they reflect on the direction and the significance of the work that he has been doing in his Changing Play sessions. They are concerned with the relationship between the work of the nursery and the children’s transition into ‘conventional’, mainstream schooling. Alex takes a perspective drawing concerns from the critical, child-centred approaches developed by the educationalist Pestalozzi. Four areas of critical concern emerge from the conversation:

1. The tendency in mainstream education toward processes of normalisation, standardization and testing;
2. Use of space, the effects on children’s physicality and restrictions on their movements;
3. Choices that are available to or restricted in children;
4. The nature of relationships and the care that is shown for and with children.

Through conversations with the Portman Centre it’s evident that they would like to integrate freer approaches to play in the face of increasing ‘schoolification’ and cuts to early years provision. It would be useful to have brief sessions with nursery staff and parents to help him ‘map things out.’ From planning sessions with parents and staff, separately and together, Albert proposes to produce a ‘loose parts’ kit that will be used to ‘initiate different discourses’ around play, education and development. Alex and Albert perceive that teachers’ knowledge and skills have been ‘diminished’ under prevailing educational policies and practices in early years education.

In this, his last session with the children at the Portman Centre, there are no materials laid out for the children. Albert has sorted and selected photographs in which one child is featured, engaged in activities. He has arranged these sets of images on large cardboard sheets, mounted with sticky putty. He has set up a display in a small room at the top of the Portman Centre building and a teacher will bring a few individuals one-by-one to have what Albert calls ‘deconstructive conversations’7 with each of the children.

Sarah, the teacher, enters with the first child, Abdul. Albert directs Abdul’s attention to the board that has images of him playing with the materials and asks him to select a few of his favourite pictures. Encouraged by Sarah, Abdul cautiously peers at the images and selects a few, taking them off the board and placing them on the carpet at Albert’s direction. Abdul is being quite shy and formal. Albert asks Abdul what is going on in one particular image.

Abdul: I make one, two, three to connect to the ceiling.
Albert: Was it difficult?
Abdul: I started to count it, one, two, three and connected it.
Albert: Why did you make it?
Abdul: Because I wanted to.

This last answer is a typical in many of the children’s answers. It appears that the doing is the thing for the children, the motivation to act is in the materials and the context and they want to do things with the stuff. They appear not to be very interested in what is made, but more in what can be done.

Abdul: I liked this because I broke it … That’s my Iron Man costume … I was in jail.

He continues on the theme of jail, saying also that he felt happy making things.

Leila

Later, another a girl, Leila, is brought into the room by Sarah. She selects a few images and then concentrates on one in which she is wrapping Alex in a corrugated Perspex tube, fastening it with tape.

Leila: We made a house.
Albert: You and Alex?
Leila: With sticky tape (Alex is wrapped up in corrugated PVC sheet in the image)
Leila: We was doing like here and here (pointing at the image and cupping hands to make a telescope better to see the image)
It was standing1!
Albert: (pointing at another chosen image) What’s happening here?
Leila: I lost my shoe in my house. My mummy couldn’t find my shoe In the image, we can see that she has on only one shoe.
Leila: (choosing and looking closely at another image) I was going inside. I was just here with Alexandra. She was in jail…

Jail, it emerges, is a concern that the children hold in common between them.

Gabriel

A third child, a boy, is brought into the room by the teacher, Sarah. Gabriel is quite shy. He doesn’t speak, only whispering occasionally to the teacher. He selects images and arranges them in pattern on the carpet.

Albert, clearly intrigued by his arrangement of images, looks inquiringly at Gabriel, but holds back from asking him any questions. It is difficult to catch anything that Gabriel is whispering. After a while, Albert asks Gabriel to choose an image he really likes, by which time it seems as if Gabriel has warmed up sufficiently to speak aloud, albeit softly.

From Hillevi Lenz Taguchi’s conceptualisation of deconstructive talks, as a possibility of making visible the dominant discourses of childhood, identity, learning, play, and gender in teaching practices.
Gabriel: That’s me inside. He arranges the picture in the pattern below. The teacher points.

Teacher: Arms, feet, head and belly

Gabriel: That’s me and I’m hiding my eyes

Albert: Why?

Gabriel: I don’t know—I didn’t want to show myself

Nadima

Nadima is very chatty and keen to stay as long as she can—she’s been there 45 minutes by the end of it. As she takes images off the cardboard mounting, she meticulously removes the small blobs of blue-tack, handing them to Albert. Nadima prodigiously composes stories.

Osman

Osman jumps around the small room.

Albert leads a workshop with Cathy Palser, a nursery teacher. Jo White, head of the Portman Centre is present, and so is Alex Thorp, Education Curator, along with Joanna Slusarczyk and Jemma Egan, Assistant Education Curators for the Serpentine Galleries. There are about 20 participants in attendance, who include early years teachers and assistants, artists and curators who are interested in, or work with, young children.

Albert’s project ran in 2016 with children and staff at the Portman Centre, and this workshop is one of the ways in which the work of the project, its practices and underlying ideas, can be extended and disseminated to a wider group of interested parties.

Albert has also produced a toolkit, Play as Radical Practice, consisting of a booklet and a set of attractive activity cards. The pack is a resource designed to be used flexibly as a game to play and as a stimulus to discussion. Albert has also produced a short video film that is made from edited footage filmed by the children who wore the small video cameras, the Go-Pros, strapped to their chests. Both the pack and the video reflect the exuberance and creativity of the children’s play with the set of ‘loose parts’ provided and supervised by Albert as he worked alongside the Serpentine Education team.

Introducing the workshop, Albert introduces early years teacher Cathy as a ‘fundamental collaborator’ and then goes on to give a brief overview of the project. He references the influence of an article by architect, planner and academic, Simon Nicholson, ‘The Theory of Loose Parts…’. Reading the article prompted Albert to collect ‘a kids toolkit of elements they could work with’. There was no right or wrong way to work with materials and the children ‘ricocheted between [being] inside [the nursery] and outside’. The idea was to ‘open up space’ with the children.

Play as Radical Practice Workshop with educators and artists, 4 July 2018

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Albert welcomes people and introduces the session—it’s a workshop on Changing Play, a collaboration between the Serpentine Galleries and the Portman Early Childhood Centre running since 2014.

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Films available: http://www.serpentinegalleries.org/learn/changing-play/play-radical-practice

Direct quotes from field notes taken at the meeting at the Portman Early Childhood Centre, 4 July 2018
playing with and modifying the locally sourced chaos. Conversations with staff after the play sessions were seminal and led him to try 'not to intervene', but to let the children’s activity lead him.

‘We think we [nursery staff] aren’t interfering,’ Cathy contributes, ‘but this was a very different idea of intervening and not asking a teaching question.’

Head of the Centre, Jo, says that the article, ‘The Theory of Loose Parts’, has become very important in early years practice in thinking about children as artists.

Albert introduces the video, saying that it was derived from the process of documenting the project through still and moving images. Some of the soundtrack was taken from the sessions when individual children gave narratives on images they had chosen in the last session of the project. There’s concentration and appreciative laughter from the workshop attendees as the film is shown.

After the film screening, Albert identifies four themes that emerged for him from the work:

1. Chaos and order—what are they and how are they productive?
2. Space—how it affects participation;
3. Roles—adults and children, contact with families;
4. Standardisation (normalisation)—play as preparation for school, or not?

Cathy talks about clearing away other play materials, ‘representative stuff’ such as saucepans and the like. There was controversy among the staff and only a couple of her colleagues were prepared to participate—some thought that it was outside of ‘normal practice’ and too risky. But, from her point of view, it worked really well—the project encouraged children to do things they don’t normally do and changed the perception and use of space. She saw the joy of some of the children but worried a little about the quieter ones given greater freedom in play and a ‘degree of anarchy’. Would the quieter children be allowed access? These and other issues were debated hotly among staff then, and they still are. The project raised questions for them, including questions that remained unanswered. Jo observed that staff are prepared to ‘let questions hang’.

The workshop provided an opportunity for productive reflection and evidence that, for Albert and the Portman Centre’s nursery staff, the project raised productive issues and questions, ones that continue to inform thinking and practice. For Albert, questions of the nature and boundaries of normalisation remain difficult to justify against externally set standards. Challenges around accountability and the failure of both the curriculum and its forms of judgement and assessment of progress in free-flowing, child-led activity is in great part what is referred to in the Portman Centre staff’s discourse around issues of normalisation and standardisation.

Alex moves the discussion on, suggesting that participants divide into small groups to play with the cards in the pack ‘Play as Radical Practice’. A number of workshop participants have not contributed to the whole group discussion and Alex’s role as curator is to try to ensure fuller and more active participation. People can play the pack in whatever way they wish, and they should then perhaps arrive at some questions to feedback. Packs are distributed and, for a quarter-of-an-hour or so, people take up the suggestion and spread the cards.

Various points arise in the feedback from small-group discussion:

— Jo presents a challenge to the idea of ‘chaos’—play activity is patterned, and it is a matter of being able to ‘see’ the pattern and its significance, particularly in terms of children’s learning and development.

— Jo also sees that the project addressed something of the children’s emotional and physical needs that are not addressed in current formulations of the curriculum.

— Talk is prompted about whether the curriculum actually prepares people for future life.

— Class differences in attitudes to freer play arise as an issue.

— The agency of children and parents is too frequently delimited—people are told what to do.

— Looking at parents being able to take control and more opportunities for parents to participate in play.

— Thinking about the meaning and implications of ‘child-led’ play arises.

— From a person working in the context of a museum an issue of how to ‘look for the voice of the child’.

— Rough play and superhero play tend to be ‘pushed down’ in early years education.

— Issues of gendered play follow on from the above point.

— From children’s gendered play, the issue of gender in staffing of early years education is raised, given the predominance of women in the staffing of early years provision.
Two artist residencies were undertaken at the Portman Early Childhood Centre between January and June 2017, sampled and observed by researcher Louisa Penfold. In what follows, Louisa draws on her field notes of observations and some excerpts from interviews she conducted with the designer Bahbak Hashemi-Nezhad, some of the parents involved, and with the Head of Centre, Jo White.

The Bahbak Hashemi-Nezhad residency explored the possibilities and limitations of the urban environment as a space for children's play from February 2017–October 2018. This was followed by Adam JB Walker and Emma McGarry from May 2017–May 2018, when the pair considered the potentials of materials in early childhood play spaces with a particular focus on children with special needs.

These Changing Play artists consistently used children's play as a springboard for dialogue and debate involving Portman Centre staff, the Serpentine, families and wider communities on issues of social justice and early childhood education. To support this, each residency session incorporated careful and collaborative planning, observation and reflection between the artist and gallery team to determine future trajectories for subsequent programme development.

Bahbak's residency at the Portman explored the potential of play in urban spaces. Over several half-day sessions, Bahbak worked with the Serpentine's education team and Portman Centre staff, taking small groups of children out of the Centre to an open space at the base of Parsons House, a high-rise housing block off the Edgware Road in north Westminster. Bahbak was particularly interested in using the sessions to think about the limitations and possibilities of neighbourhood spaces for children's play. During each session, different objects and materials such as ropes, wooden planks, plastic crates and trolleys were introduced as open-ended 'loose parts' (Nicholson, 1971) for children to use and play with in this empty and somewhat desolate open space of concrete paving stones at the foot of a tower block.

During the residency, Bahbak commented:

The project continues to reveal the potential for play in the urban environment through children's experiences. Here architecture acts as a non-didactic play-scape rich with loose parts which are identified and made visible by the child's imagination. The play acts at Parsons House have been made possible by the Portman nursery, which acts as a unique permissive agent operating between the expectations and restrictions placed by parents and the ideas proposed by artists. The 'evidence' of play-acts produced in the form of animations, flipbooks, and photographs engaged parents into defamiliarising/questioning their relationship with the built environment and its capacity for free play...We can define two species of loose parts: those inherent in the urban environment identified and made visible by children, and those introduced to any given space by adults.
These are some comments made by the children on the journey to Parson's House.

That's where my Dad buys lunch.
That's Tesco, I go there with my Mum every day.
We are going to walk past my house!

Bahbak introduces the first material 'intervention' during this session—a large wooden plank. The children work together to carry it. The group of six children spot some construction workers near the street and carry or take it over to them.

We are helping them build things.

The 'loose part' materials (Nicholson, 1971) introduced different ways for children to change, modify, adapt and manipulate the urban landscape. Returning to the Portman Centre, the children were then able to share their stories and experiences from the session with teachers, friends and parents.

Bahbak generated an array of visual documentation that consisted of photos of the sessions. Later, these were shared with the Portman Centre's staff and parents. The documentation was used as a catalyst for further discussion of adult's ideas and opinions of children's play at the Portman Centre and in the neighbourhood. Out of these discussions, new learning and artistic strategies emerged that Bahbak then took into consideration in future sessions. Parents commented that:

Play experiences like this are so important because they give my son space to imagine and grow.
In all the pictures, my son is smiling.
We go to playgrounds because my son asks to go there. He loves them. I didn't think of taking my children somewhere like this (referring to Parsons House) but now I see it differently. I see my child differently in how he plays.
When I was growing up, my parents 'bubble-wrapped' me and I don't want that for my children. My limit is that they know their limits, my children need to try things for themselves.

Bahbak's final Changing Play session with the group from the Portman brought together families and children from the centre through an open invitation for all parents to join in a group play session at Parson's House. Children were able to share their favourite discoveries of the space with their families and play together in the urban space.

As an extension of his residency, Hashemi-Nezhad produced a short film featuring images from the project. In addition, he created a series of adult and children's play kits for local children's centres to use to help identify and activate spaces for free play within the city. The kits were launched with a series of workshops in October 2018.
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The creative practice of Adam and Emma featured numerous collaborations with families and children with disabilities. As the Portman Centre has an unusually high number of special needs children enrolled, the artists’ residency provided rich possibilities for further exploration and discussion with families and children at the centre. Throughout their residency, Emma and Adam worked to produce a series of play sessions comprised of sensory-rich environments featuring materials such as soil, bricks, metallic ventilation pipes, thermal blankets and foam blocks. The artists approached the sessions as a series of experiments that they could use to observe and respond to the natural interactions that occurred between the children, staff and the materials.

During the sessions, children were able to explore the properties of the materials whilst simultaneously producing individual and collective artistic processes through experimentation. Each session was intentionally left open-ended so that the artists had the flexibility to respond to children’s interests and curiosities as they played with the materials. Further interventions were made throughout the session including introducing new materials and removing others. Laying out the materials in new and unfamiliar ways, for example stacking the thermal blankets into a large pile, created new possibilities for creative thinking and play.

During one of the sessions, the children used the metallic ventilation tubes to explore how noise and sound travels through the material. “Can you hear me at the other end?” “No. Wait, yes I can!”

Before touching the materials, a child stands watching others in the space for 30 minutes before participating himself. The teaching assistant lifts one of the blankets and holds it in front of the boy. He smiles and rubs his thumbs together in anticipation for the material to fall over him. As it falls over him, the boy giggles and moves his hands to scrunch the metallic blanket and pulling it down in front of him. “It’s making a sound,” he yells.

In the second part of their residency Emma and Adam worked with a group of parents whose children have been labelled with SEND. Over the course of four months the group developed a book, which centres on the following questions: Why and how are children with SEND being failed by the education system? How might adopting a special rights approach improve experiences for children with SEND? How can parents and carers come together with early years workers to create a network of support and solidarity? The book Special Rights was launched by parents with education and health professionals in November 2018.

Play as a catalyst for thinking about early childhood from multiple perspectives

Both residencies generated a creative space for children, artists, Portman Centre staff, Serpentine team members and families to engage with the ethics and debates of early childhood practices from different perspectives. This allowed for critical and positive debate around how people construct and negotiate their understandings of children, education and play in their communities. Drawing on the visual documentation as a catalyst for instigating dialogue, the discussions between the artists, staff and families often explored the assumptions and politics around ideas of childhood in society. Continuous discussion amongst the team allowed for
The ideas, discourses and practices towards children to become more complex over time. Jo White, the Head of the Portman Early Childhood Centre, commented that the residencies have challenged the staff and families. Jo talks about artists’ residencies, curated by the education team from the Serpentine. She says that the residencies help children, staff and parents:

- think about things that we possibly wouldn’t have otherwise. The discourse becomes more complex when you have the opportunity to work and think with people who are coming at it from fundamentally different starting points. That shared discourse of a shared experience from two different perspectives—from the creative Bahbak mind and from Natalie’s (a teacher from the Portman) more practical mind—they come together and both support and grow with that intervention. We challenge some of the artist’s views and they challenge some of ours and we negotiate together, and I think that is a very exciting process. There is no real, clear answer to any of it. It is an intellectual exercise really that I think we need, we need to do often...We need to really look hard and consider how we understand play and learning.

- The Serpentine team and the artists have given people confidence in expressing their views and they have made us think differently. We have been challenged to rethink some of our views, as has the Serpentine been challenged to rethink some of their views. It has been a very symbiotic relationship which is very good. I do think that thinking and reflecting is something that must be at the heart of school life. We need to constantly be creating new realities because each child is different and constantly changing.

- As for the children, I think it is great for them to have different experiences with different people and being able to go and join in with someone they don’t know terribly well but in a safe and secure environment, taking chances and taking risks. This can happen as the artists, or the artist and Alex, are pretty good pedagogues as well. This would not happen with all artists that come in. It is not replicable just because ‘you are an artist and I am a pedagogue.’ There is a chemistry between us that works really well.

- Artists, centre staff and Serpentine team were continuously responsive to emergent ideas, processes and tensions that arose from the discussions. Instead of viewing these tensions as ‘problems’ the artists approached them as interesting and innovative starting points for further enquiry throughout the residencies. Serpentine staff played an active and critical role in facilitating the relationships and discourses amongst children, the centre staff, the artists, parents and wider communities.

- Artist’s creative processes produce unique pedagogical environments that can be used to support children’s divergent and creative thought processes. A last word from Jo White as she talked about what she considers to be the significant in artists working with children through arts-based play activities:

- Creativity and play is about becoming lifelong learners and instilling a lifelong curiosity in the world. Negotiating the creation of ideas and ways of thinking about children—an immensely political and complex process...

- The role of adults is important. The role of a creative adult in facilitating children’s play is key. We cannot underestimate the importance of the artist’s way of thinking and supporting children’s divergent ways of learning. We need to ask: are they learning something here that may help them in school and in life? For example, in the picture where they are balancing on the beam, are they learning about space, different surfaces and balance? Are they learning to think for themselves and communicate ideas like “I will try this; you can try that?” Artists see space and play differently from children...

- Creativity is extremely difficult to assess and mark against targets. Things [that] grow slowly and encourage children to think deeply are not emphasized enough in schools and the curriculum. That’s why this is important for us.
The project with Adelita Husni-Bey took place at the Portman Early Childhood Centre on Wednesday mornings in the autumn of 2017. Her aim was to work with a group of parents and staff on issues to do with care—among other aspects, how parents and childhood centre staff care for children, how staff care for parents, and exploring how children might care for parents. Participating in her project on care was researcher Anton Franks, who was involved in four out of the six sessions of Adelita’s sessions over the course of the October and November of 2017.

After three days research and observation visits and a few days before embarking on her workshops at the Portman Centre, Adelita agreed to meet with the researcher, Anton, along with Serpentine Galleries’ Education Curator, Alex, in a nearby café. Adelita had visited the Portman Centre some time before embarking on this face-to-face project and then took a break before she returned to work with parents and staff at the Portman Centre. From her prior visit, she knew something about the locality and had a sense of the community using the centre and the children.

Visiting again more recently, she sensed that the Portman Centre was emptier than during her previous visit and was aware that this was the result of the impact of both local and central government policy. Locally, it was to do with a policy of relocating families from the area of Westminster to outlying suburbs. Centrally, it appeared to be one of the effects of the government’s policy of providing 30 hours of free preschool child provision for 3- and 4-year-old children. Each of these policies arose later, in discussion with the parents involved in her project. From initial discussions, it appeared that particular and acute issues had arisen around the support, care and education of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and their parents. In short, there is a shortage of appropriate provision. Despite an ostensible policy of integration into mainstream schools, they appear unwilling to offer places to children with SEND, alongside a reduction in the supply of specialist schools.

In other work, Adelita has worked on art projects with a range of children and young people, some of whom have had disabilities, outside the structures of formal state education in France and the US. She talked about engaging in ‘instrumental work’ as an artist, trying to push the boundaries of the gallery and funding structures, doing art that engages participants and pushes towards socio-political change. Having done a master’s degree in urban culture at Goldsmiths’ College in London, she is interested in taking ideas from ‘citizenship education’ using role-play and ‘theatre exercises’ and techniques that she has derived from Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) (Boal, 1979).

Adelita wanted to work with parents and staff on the nature of care, the giving and receiving of care. There was an understanding on her part that the work may be sensitive and will require the building of a relationship of trust. To achieve a relationship of trust, she intended to work through ‘structured exercises’ that moved from talk towards drama as a form of play, ‘transposing from children’s games to the adult realm.’ From these exercises, Adelita hoped to be able to ‘understand what care means to [parents] for themselves as well as for their children’. On a wider social-political perspective, she is cognisant of the effects of prevailing political priorities and is interested in how ‘impositions of policy’ are perceived by parents as having effects on relationships of care. There is thus awareness...
of the layered complexity of factors affecting ‘relationships to families and the world.’ She drew a diagram in her notebook to illustrate and explain what she meant:

![Diagram of 'me' and 'who supports you?']

In the first session, scheduled for late September 2017, she wanted to establish a relationship of trust with the group before the researcher, Anton, visited and participated in sessions, so it was agreed that he could attend the second session, early in October. She then had other commitments so would return to work with the group in November.

After this discussion Adelita emailed Anton, sending him two journal articles on the themes of the ethics of care, disability and conviviality, demonstrating her wider socio-political commitment and the kinds of academic interest that supports her thinking and practice (Kittay, 2011, McArthur and Zavitsanos, 2013). From the Kittay article Adelita picked out: ‘When we acknowledge how dependence on another saves us from isolation and provides the connections to another that makes life worthwhile, we can start the process of embracing needed dependencies’ (Kittay, 2011, 57).

She went on to meditate on ideas of dependence and independence:

‘Kittay describes Carol Gilligan’s interaction with a group of high school girls. When asked to choose between the words ‘dependence’ and ‘independence’, the girls point to ‘independence’ unflinchingly, yet, subsequently, when asked to decide between ‘dependence’ and ‘isolation’, they begin to rethink their initial premise. Supporting her thinking on the move from discussion to active, participatory drama, she continues, ‘How do normalised actions/gestures of care between care-takers, parents and children move beyond the paradigm of independence and isolation illustrated above? What role do different forms of language (gestural, spoken, affective) have in structuring notions of care across cultural milieus?’ (from Adelita’s project proposal, Serpentine Galleries commission for Changing Play, 2017).

Bearing in mind Adelita’s interest in applying drama approaches in her work with parents and staff, Anton reciprocated, emailing Adelita and Alex, attaching an article by applied drama practitioner James Thompson on the aesthetics of care (Thompson, 2015).

One morning in early October, as planned, Anton waited in reception of the Portman Centre, where he met Education Curator, Alex. She told him that the previous week’s workshop with Adelita went well—three parents and three staff were present. Adelita spent some time reading to children in the nursery and, from this, the idea emerged that they would produce a children’s book for distribution to other nurseries and children’s centres. The book would provide a focus and aim and would be a way of disseminating the work of the project.

Adelita had been a little delayed because she wanted to photocopy a couple of newspaper articles to read in the session, but Alex and Anton went up to the room that was allocated for the morning’s session. There were two members of the Portman Centre staff, a staff member from a neighbouring early childhood centre, and a parent gathered in an upstairs room. Adelita arrived, and the assembled group arrange around the allocated room. It’s not the room that people thought they would be in. It was narrow and rectangular, with two sofas facing each other along the longer sides, some chairs at either end and a coffee table in the middle of the room. It was not ideal for doing active drama, but it didn’t seem to worry people. The staff, Sally and Noora, arranged themselves on chairs at the short end of the room by the door while the parent, Zara, researcher Anton, and Alex sat on the sofas facing each other. Adelita settled herself cross-legged on the floor.

Adelita introduced the Augusto Boal’s ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’ approaches to the group, giving a brief outline of his history in Argentina and Brazil. She talked about oppression as a ‘dynamic and complex set of feelings’ and that, for example, those oppressed may go on to oppress others in turn. Next, she introduced an exercise Boal named ‘Colombian Hypnosis’, undertaken in pairs, in which one person, the ‘hypnotised’, has to follow the hand gestures of the other person, the hypnotiser, in whatever direction, moving in and around the space (Boal, 1992, 63). There is no direct touching, but a gap between the hypnotiser’s hand and the hypnotised. Everyone, including the researcher, was involved. There was a cautious start, but soon the exercise picked up momentum—after a while people began to laugh. It was an exercise of trust and power. After a few, short minutes, Adelita suggested that we swap roles and, soon after, she brought the exercise to an end, asking what it looks like and the ‘sense’ it gives to the participants. Noora enjoyed ‘the power of dragging.’

Adelita asked if it felt like a ‘power relationship’, and what it ‘felt like to be leader or led.’

Sally said, ‘It felt more like dragging than leading, not in a kind way, as it would be leading by the hand...because of the gap.’
Adelita asked ‘Does using the hand in this way mean something different?’ Sally didn’t feel relaxed and Adelita, looking around the room, followed her comment by asking people to define what ‘oppression’ means to them.

—Controlling someone.
—Being controlled by someone.
—Not being happy.
—Being controlled.
—Squashed.
—Heavy.
—Unsafe—not safe in the home
—Not safe in the community—wanting to be something for themselves but the community won’t let you

Adelita reminded the group that, last week, they had discussed lack of resources and asked: ‘Does lack of resources lead to oppression?’ The question hangs.

Next, Adelita introduced and distributed articles she had downloaded and had copied from The Guardian newspaper—they’re a critical perspective on the UK government’s introduction of 30 hours of ‘free’ childcare for three- and four-year-olds in England. She asked for volunteers to read them aloud. Before the reading, based just on headlines and Adelita’s introduction, a lively discussion took place, with the Portman Centre’s two staff members leading. They were keen to talk about the effects of cuts imposed by Westminster, the local authority, that has led to cuts in staffing and a radical reduction in services and advice offered to parents. There used to be support for filling in claims forms, help with finding employment, a lunch club, Pilates and yoga, more trips out (to the seaside etc.) and these have been cut back. Families in the area have been relocated to outlying areas such as Dagenham, but they still want to maintain contact with people in the Church Street area around the Portman Centre.

The effects of the 30 hours support for pre-school places is seen, paradoxically, as reducing provision, as the amount of grant available does not adequately cover the costs of the nursery. It has, however, had the effect of enabling local schools to expand their nursery provision as they have been able to absorb costs in whole school budgets—an economy of scale. The scheme is perceived by the two staff members to benefit families that are ‘well off’ and is seen to discriminate against families with fewer resources, like those that the Portman Centre caters for. Discussion moved to provision of 15 hours ‘free’ care for 2-year-olds that is intended to release parents to find employment, but in effect does not achieve this—to avoid the rent cap you have to work 16 hours a week, but the free entitlement of childcare is only 15—the group thought it unlikely that people would find employment to fit within the 15-hours’ time-frame.

After this discussion—during which one more parent, Magdalena, arrived and was welcomed—the articles Adelita had provided are read aloud. More discussion followed, again with the staff as the main participants. Apparently sensing that discussion has kept participants stuck to their seats, Adelita wanted to move them on to the ‘theatre part…thinking about problems or conflicts.’ The group would be working on scenes ‘just a minute long.’ There should be three people in each group: one in a room, another enters, and the two engage in conversation about a problem. A third character should then enter who would ‘shift the balance of conversation, shifting the power dynamic…Show the audience a problem, but don’t resolve it.’ Adelita gave some brief examples that are ‘model scenes’ that people can use or do their own. There was a heightened level of energy as two groups of three are formed and people stood and started to plan their scenes—Zara, Noora and Anton form one group, and Alex, Sally and Magdalena the other.

Zara, animated, related the story of her experience in trying to get her daughter, Lena, into a reception class in a local school. Lena has an autistic spectrum condition and is electively non-verbal. Although this school had places, the headteacher was unwilling to accept Lena, saying that she would be too disruptive, and they would not be able to cope with her. Zara strongly felt that the manager was being unfair and discriminatory. The group improvised the scene once and then both scenes were shown to the other group. Zara worked hard to try and persuade the headteacher to accept her daughter Lena. Noora intervened, calmly suggesting that the school has adequate resources to provide for Lena, but the headteacher rebuffs her reasonable arguments and the scene ended. In the other group, Magdalena, who had been silent in the discussion, was now energised and, in her group, acted out her part with great conviction.11 Sally felt that the scene in which Lena is refused a place was convincing. At the Portman Centre, real effort is made to circumvent problems. Time has, however, run out for the session, as Sally and Noora have to return to work.

After the session, Alex, Adelita and Anton stayed for a while longer, reflecting on the session. Adelita felt that when staff were talking through issues it was hard for parents to find a way in. The suggestions she made for the scenes were ‘extracted from earlier conversations.’ The following week, there was another session which the researcher, Anton, was unable to attend. The group engaged in another of Augusto Boal’s theatre exercises and shared more stories about care, children and parents.

II

Just over a month later, early in November, Adelita returned to the Portman Centre. For this session, the group was in a larger, airier space—the Portman Centre’s créche room. As Adelita and Anton settle into the room, Fahada, the staff member from a neighbouring Early Childhood Centre appeared, giving a warm and cheerful greeting.

Adelita produced two picture books from her bag: A Family is a Family is a Family is a Family by Sara O’Leary, illustrated by Qin Lang, and Skin Again, by bell hooks, illustrated by Chris Raschka. As Anton flicked through them, Adelita said that, although she likes the work of academic bell hooks, she doesn’t think her children’s book is ‘very successful.’

11 Because Anton participates in one of the scenes, he has at this point to abandon taking field notes and is able to record only the content of the scene in which he takes part.
Portman Centre staff Noora and Sally arrived, followed in quick succession by Zara and then Serpentine Education Curator Alex. With the group assembled, Adelita outlined her intentions for the morning’s session. First, a ‘warm-up’, ‘[Several] Actors on Stage’, another Boal exercise (1992, 147) in which a member of the group tells a story and others act it out in mime. Next, looking at and discussing the picture books. Finally, time to look at Adelita’s storyboard, ‘plus some text to illustrate the images’. They are drafts and open to change, Adelita told the group. The story had been taken from Zara’s story about her daughter, Lena, that was acted out in the previous session.

Two stories were told to be acted out by others alongside the telling. It was a form of picture book made by a storyteller and illustrated by others in the group. Adelita ventured first with her story, demonstrating a willingness to put herself alongside the others, and setting a model. It was an intensely personal and sad story, after which Alex and Noora volunteered to play parts in a short scene based on Adelita’s story.

Fahada volunteered to tell a story next. She told of a friend who has had trouble in her marriage. According to Fahada, the problem rests in cultural differences, as her friend is from Morocco and her husband is Ethiopian. The husband meets his sister-in-law for coffee and her friend doesn’t like it—it’s not acceptable in Morocco but is apparently normal in Ethiopian culture. The drama, however, was in the telling of the story and the ‘actors’ were not sure how to depict this story. Although useful in terms of storying, the ‘actors on stage’ exercise had been only partially successful, mostly in depicting images from Adelita’s story.

After this short exercise, members of the group looked through the picture books. Sally, who has been a school librarian, said that she liked the one about different kinds of family but doesn’t like the bell hooks book much. She observes that they are ‘all quite middle-class’. Adelita read the bell hooks book first, after which Sally and Noora responded that children are not likely to ‘understand what it’s all about.’ The book appears as an attenuated lecture about attitudes to children with different skin colours rather than a story.

Adelita asked Anton to read the second book, which more accessible and about different forms of family group—parents of different cultures, dis-abilities, two mothers, or two fathers, and so forth. The readings generated discussion about family differences, how they might be read by adults to children and used to talk about different kinds of family. Sally thought that children usually do not perceive differences—there’s a child in her twin children’s class who has two mums and it seems normal to them. Noora agreed—small children cannot be racist. Adelita felt that the parents are the ones who ‘reinforce differences’. Alex had been thinking of ‘affirmation’, the need for parents to see themselves as having had positive experiences and to communicate these with their children.

In the final part of this session, Adelita showed the storyboard that she had been working on. She reminded the group that the initial discussion had been stimulated from her question ‘what does care mean?’ (Adelita’s emphasis). She had made the storyboard on a large sheet of paper, but it was quite difficult to follow, but there were images too, to which she draws the group’s attention.
Here there is a carer and a ‘child character’ as a ‘weird yellow bird…the idea is to represent a mother or a care-taker’. It could be, she explained, that ‘this is how Sally cares for…’ or ‘making potions or food,’ or ‘reading’. Adelita demonstrated great flexibility, saying that she is very open to changing the order of images and adapting the story, or ‘to completely change them’.

There are blanks that can be filled in whatever way people would like. Or, ‘this is how Lena cares for Zara by reading her stories.’ Sally was alerted by this last statement—‘We didn’t think about how children care for parents in the first session. I couldn’t think how…’

People liked the image of the ‘happy child’ [in the centre of the frame, above]. The discussion moved to talk about ‘day care’. Adelita reminded the group, ‘Another thing we talked about, what would happen in a world without care? How do we talk about it? What would it look like?’ This led back to discussion of the scene with the ‘bad manager’ who didn’t want to accept Zara’s daughter Lena in his school. People looked at Anton, who protests that he was just playing a part. Adelita asked, ‘How do we develop or represent the story of the bad manager?’ It led to discussion on ‘badness’ in this context—whether it is in individuals or whether it is systemic. Sally asked, ‘Who’s the story for?’ which Adelita thought was a good question. Is the book directed at adults, such as the ‘bad manager’—‘how will an adult deal with another adult who says they can’t cope?’

The last story shown by Adelita has been ‘inspired’ by previous discussion about trips out of the centre to the beach. They used to be a regular feature but have been cut back under ‘austerity.’ Adelita, thinking about children playing in the sandpit in the nursery, suggested that it might be a small island that could be represented by the shells. Adelita, Noora and Anton had represented government in the figure of ‘Mayor Slug’, unsure as to why she has chosen a slug. The question was ‘who is Mayor Slug giving money too, then?’ Sally and Noora thought that it was being given to ‘fat cats.’

The group had their attention fixed on the trips they have done. They had taken children to Marylebone Station nearby where a ‘kind man’, a member of station staff, allowed them onto a platform and onto a train that was not departing for some while. And then they used to take children camping in Epping Forest, during which accompanying staff got very little sleep. They have been to the Science Museum and to the National Gallery, but these sites didn’t grab the children’s attention, and to the Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fountain in Hyde Park, which was more successful as the children had fun splashing about.

Adelita then pulled people’s attention back to thinking about the imaginary places that the children might take the care-takers. Sally, thinking about children playing in the sandpit in the nursery, suggested that it might be a small island that could be represented by the shells. Adelita, in story-building mode, repeated ‘shells in the sandpit’. The children have since the last session, saying that she had developed the story. She had provisionally titled the story ‘Too Much’, based on Zara’s story about her experiences with her daughter, Lena. There was also another story she has called ‘Sea Shells’. She had not made an ending to either story and stressed that they are totally open to be changed.

Pointing to the figures in the first set of images, Adelita said, ‘that’s you, Sally and Noora.’ She was playing with different styles and had depicted Zara’s daughter as a little yellow bird. There is some text, but again, it’s all open to change: ‘Sally and Noora are working at the Early Childhood Centre. Sally and Noora are care workers.’ Adelita explained that she wants to keep the name ‘Early Childhood Centre’ instead of ‘nursery’ because the Portman Centre is a ‘special place.’

Fahada thought, ‘It was good, because it shows that workers care for each other. They are autonomous.’

Adelita had wanted to keep with the theme of care that came up in the first session and that they had worked with in every session since. Picking up on Sally’s comment in the previous session in which she had tried to think about how children care for adults, there followed a discussion on how this dynamic of care might be represented. Adelita responded to this saying that the care workers care for the children by taking them on a trip to the beach and children care for the adults by taking them to ‘imaginary places.’

Talk continued about cuts in funding that had resulted in a reduction in facilities. Adelita had represented government in the figure of ‘Mayor Slug’, unsure as to why she has chosen a slug. The question was ‘who is Mayor Slug giving money too, then?’ Sally and Noora thought that it was being given to ‘fat cats.’

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asked to go to the seaside, but they are not able to go because they would like to go by train, and there is no money for the fare because it has been taken away. This would be a way of playing to the children's ideas and explaining about the effects of a lack of funding. It would be difficult for the children to think about where money is going, and easier for them to think about it if they know it has been taken away.

Time in this session was getting short—Adelita said that it will be hard to 'wrap up the story today.'

Following the previous week's discussion, Adelita had planned one more session, but the Portman Centre could not fit it into their schedule. This morning, work continued on the picture book and Adelita said that she hoped that she would be able to bring in a finished session the following spring for people to see before it goes for publication.

It was now late November and the last Wednesday morning of Adelita's project this autumn. It was a windy day. When Adelita arrived the group—Zara, Sally, Noora, Fahada, Alex and Anton—are already at the Portman Centre. The group had been allocated the crèche room again and Adelita was pleased as she had been worried that there wouldn't be enough room to lay out the drawings she had been working on over the past week.

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Adelita expanded on ideas underlying the Theatre of the Oppressed, particularly that there is not a clear distinction between ‘good and bad people’. Anton observed that Boal has written about ‘the cop in the head.’ Adelita has worked in schools that are founded on anarchist principles in which children have talked about protest. In continental Europe, Adelita observed, there is more of an established culture of protest than appears to be in the UK at present. It was now 11.00 a.m., and time had run out for this session—Sally and Noora had to return to work.
Originally graduating with a degree in jewellery, Jasleen ‘did not study social practice at art school, just the technique of jewellery design’. It was an outreach project with a museum, in which there was ‘an absence of care’, that started her thinking about a socially engaged, ‘more structured way of working’. While studying for an MA at the Royal College of Art, at which she constructed a Chai stall out of recycled material, she developed ideas about ‘making stuff’ in the context of ‘cultural collisions and nuances’.12

Having visited the Portman Centre for three days of research and observation, Jasleen wrote in her proposal about her interest in ‘pursuing the micro-politics of cooking and eating together, to engage in macro-politics concerning the site and community of Portman Early Childhood Centre’ to ‘reinvigorate the cooking club of 2008’ that had been cut due to a lack of funding in the wake of the global economic crash. She wanted sessions to revolve around the making of bread, ‘taking it in turns each week to share a recipe, technique or culturally significant bread’. Her choice of the making and eating of bread was because she is ‘interested in bread as something social and political’ and stems from an awareness that as ‘the simplest of food sources’, bread may be denied to poorer people, sparking food riots and social unrest, while the ‘healthiest options’ of food are always available to people who have more access to greater financial, cultural and material resources. Thinking through the detail of session content, Jasleen proposed a structure that involved ‘collective cooking, eating together, discussion and listening to each other’, anticipating that discussion around cooking and eating might involve ‘sharing recipes, tips for wellness, stories, concerns, memories’. Her aim was:

> to use the project and funding to think about the issues being faced by the centre and its users and how we can pool our knowledges to create an internal system of care (something the centre already succeeds in in so many areas). I want to create a group and space for nourishment, knowledge exchange, consciousness raising, listening, sharing, wellness, self-care, slowness and activism.13

In the conclusion to her project proposal, Jasleen had originally been planning on producing a newspaper or magazine, as a way of documenting and disseminating the work of the project. It was envisaged to provide a way of reporting on people’s ideas and aspirations as they arose in conversations around making and eating food and would contain bread recipes shared by members of the group. By the end of the project, however, another idea had evolved, developed from the experience of making and sharing food, and convivial conversations on culture, care and family that were stimulated by questions that Jasleen provided and that took place initially in small groups and then opened out to the whole group.

Jasleen’s project was scheduled to take place in the Portman’s Drop-In centre sessions for parents with babies and toddlers.

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12 Quotes taken from a conversation between Jasleen Kaur and researcher, Anton Franks, 31 May 2018.
13 Quotes from Jasleen Kaur’s project proposal, forwarded by email by Serpentine Galleries’ Education Curator, Alex Thorp, to Anton Franks, 20 December 2017
over ten sessions between 1.30 and 3.30p.m. on Wednesday afternoons, from the end of January to early April 2018. The Drop-In is located on the first floor of the Portman Centre's three-storey building at the end of a corridor leading behind a bolted low gate designed to keep the small children safe in the centre. It is a large, airy, light space consisting of a separate, carpeted ‘sensory room’ used as a crèche off the corridor, and a larger open-plan area equipped with low chairs for small people, tables and plenty of stimulating play equipment and materials. In the large space, there is a small climbing frame, a west-facing balcony space accessed by a door from the main space and, behind a partial partition, an area with a large rug, a sandpit, chairs and bean-bags. Off the corridor, there are also separate rooms housing a children’s bathroom and a compact kitchen. The kitchen is equipped with a large fridge, a table and bench down one wall at which parents can feed their small children, and facing it is a domestic cooker, a sink behind an east-facing window, and a small work-surface area on the side of the room behind the door. It was in this small kitchen that the bread, once prepared, was cooked—either fried on the hob or baked in the oven.

As the label ‘Drop-In’ suggests, attendance varied, with some parents and children attending every week and others dropping in and out over the course of the project. Over the course of Jasleen’s project, researcher Anton Franks attended and participated in six sessions from mid-February to early April 2018. It had been agreed with Education Curator Alex Thorp that he would not attend the first of Jasleen’s sessions so that she could establish herself with the group of parents and children who attended the Drop-In sessions. Along with other people at the sessions, Anton helped with the preparation of bread, playing with the children and joining in with conversations when the bread was being made and later eaten. When possible, Anton took field notes in the course of sessions, and later expanded on them in reflection, and these notes in edited form are the main source for this case-study. After the sessions Anton also joined in, when there was time, to engage in reflective discussion with Jasleen, Drop-In staff and Serpentine education curators. Some digital images were snapped in sessions as an aide memoire, however—sensitive to issues around the taking images of children, parents’ cultural preferences, and lacking formal permissions—although some images of food are included below, images of participants do not appear in this case-study.

At Jasleen’s first session at the end of January she led off with one of her aunt’s recipes—Maki Matfi Roti—a flat bread made cornflour and spices. Brought up in a Sikh family household in Glasgow, working with this recipe shared something of Jasleen’s home culture. As Jasleen hoped that attendees would be prepared to share recipes, her willingness to initiate the project by sharing a recipe from her home culture set a model, demonstrating that she was prepared to put herself in a position that she expected others to take after her.

The following session Leila, one of the parents, had volunteered to provide the recipe and supervise the cooking of bread. She was there early with her two children, a baby and one that may be of school age and so, older than children that normally attend the Drop-In with their parents. This was London schools’ half-term holiday week, so as other parents and children arrived, there were other older children. Leila told Anton that she’s making a Moroccan bread she called ‘harcha’. She

beamed, clearly looking forward to the session.

Sheila, the manager of the Drop-In was there, too, as were Alex and Jemma from the Serpentine. As usual, the Serpentine education curators were full participants, there to support Jasleen who was looking expectant, anticipating a busy session, the first led by a parent. Jemma, looking relaxed, held a clipboard, and had clearly consulted with Leila at the first session and had done the shopping for the ingredients for the harcha bread—fine- and medium-ground semolina, olive oil, plain yoghurt and sachets of baking powder. Jemma said that there were 35 people participating in the first session and she was pleased with the turn out. Not yet quite 1.30pm, nine parents with their children were already there, the parents talking with each other and the children playing on the small climbing frame. Jemma approached the parents, finding out whether they or their children have any allergies and recording their answers.

As the mixing was well underway, more parents had arrived. The great majority were women with just one father who was accompanied by three children. Many of the women appeared to know each and chatted animatedly in Arabic as they kneaded the mixture. The father checked after his children but did not participate in the preparation of the dough. Quite a few children were at the tables, the older ones joining in with the making of bread, while toddlers and babies enjoyed playing with the flour and dough, and some were quite content banging the wooden spoons against the plastic bowls. In general, the parents seemed unconcerned that their children were getting messy.

Leila and another parent disappeared into the kitchen and began frying the harcha on the hob, keeping them warm in the oven when they were fried sufficiently. Talking with Jan, Anton asked her how she thought the session was going. She seemed pleased, relaxed—‘Bread brings people together,’ she said. It was a good and interesting comment that gave support to Jasleen’s anticipated outcomes for her project.

Paper plates are distributed around the L-shaped table and people gather, including the women and children who have been sitting in the far end of the room. The intention was that people would be taking turns to lead the making of bread. The following week, it was decided that it would be manakish (or mana’ish), a yeasted bread that is made in Lebanon. There was a discussion about the problem of using the small oven and Jasleen was going to think it through. She wanted people to talk during the making and eating of bread and this was happening, but she thought that it was not easy to manage or direct.

As people settled and ate, Sheila picked up a tambourine and led group singing of children’s songs—‘Hello Everybody! How Are You?’, ‘The Wheels on the Bus,’ and ‘If You’re Happy and You Know It’. The songs have accompanying actions and hand gestures—everyone appeared to have joined in the singing. It appeared to be a ritual that happens at the end of each Drop-In session.
It was time to clear up and there were many hands to make it quick work. A few of the parents had children to pick up from the Portman Centre's nursery on the ground floor, and others get their children ready to go and the Drop-In centre empties. After they have gone, Alex suggests that it would be a good idea for Jasleen, Sheila the Drop-In manager, Alex, and Jemma from the Serpentine to spend a little time reviewing the session, and Anton the researcher tags along. Sheila suggested that we all should go to the sensory room to talk as she was keen to set up the following week’s session.

It was assumed that a certain amount of mess-making would be tolerated, but Sheila suggested that for some of the parents, playing with food would seem to be wasteful, partly because it is not in their ‘home culture’, but also because some of them have to manage on such little money. Jasleen wondered about how much food stuff there needed to be, both to cook with and to play with—there appeared to be a tension there.

Sheila moved on to thinking about her role. She was ‘not interested in a policing role—it was just nice to sit and talk with people.’ It is clear that she knows the people and their stories quite well and was keen to take the opportunity offered to get to know the parents and children better, partly by engaging in talk and play, but also by standing back to observe interactions between adults and children.

Alex wanted to thank Sheila for allowing the session to happen and for participating, especially given that Sheila was not feeling particularly well and was short-staffed (half-way through the session, a woman came up from duty on reception to assist Jan). The session had been stressful, Alex thought, especially as there was an issue about timing. There would need to be more thought to timing if they were going to make a yeast bread, manakish, in the next session—it would need time to prove and then to bake.

The focus of the second observed session was the making of naan bread. It was the last day of February and there had been a heavy snowfall before the session. There were fewer parents and children there—at the start of the session, nine parents, all mothers, with their babies and toddlers, although a few more arrived in the course of the session. This week it was Naima’s turn to hold the recipe and lead the preparation of the bread, although there is much discussion and advice given by other women present.

The head of the Portman Centre, Jo, dropped by and inquired, ‘What are you making?’ She nodded approvingly when given the answer, naan. She stayed for a couple of minutes longer and then departed quietly.

Accompaniments were efficiently being assembled—cucumber grated, lemons squeezed, coriander chopped, splashes of olive oil added, and then it was all left to macerate. Around the table, as the women rolled, stretched and threw the dough, there was a brief eruption of joyfulness reflected in laughter and excited chatter. There’s a sense that the women were in their ‘home territory’. At the same time, one of the women who prepared the cucumber cutters for raita now had a grip of some lemons. She peeled them expertly, leaving the pith, cut them into small pieces then sprinkled salt on them and, when someone arrived with a jar of ground cumin, this too was sprinkled on. The plate with the lemon was handed around the table.

Naima arrived out of the kitchen with shallow baking trays dusted with flour, picking up rolled out discs of naan dough, and took them into the kitchen to be fried in butter on the hob then left in a low oven to keep warm.

Watching proceedings, one of the women who had stayed out of the kitchen talked to Anton: ‘No matter how small your kitchen is, you’ll cook for a wedding.’ Another woman laughs, ‘I remember my Nan used a bathtub for chicken. That’s how we grow up. A big family thing to do… We share our food’ ‘In Morocco, [there is] a culture of cooking…Many children in the area who are poor, we give food…’ This led to talk of making couscous, steamed in a double pan. Leila, who had previously led the preparation and cooking of harcha bread, joined in the discussion, ‘In Ramadan, whole families prepare food.’ ‘Is everyone here Moroccan?’ Jasleen enquired. ‘I’m from Lebanon. But it’s the same culture…’ one woman responds. ‘Yes, it’s all the same culture. Arabic culture, wherever you’re from…’ ‘Cooking culture…Especially bread-making. Everyone makes their dough at home, then takes it to a communal oven… Everyone makes their mark [on the bread dough]’ Jasleen, ‘How do you do that?’ ‘With three fingers, or a fork. Nothing fancy…’ Already, by this short time, some of the naans are ready and are brought to the table.
Chairs are arranged around the tables so everyone can sit and so we all sit to eat. It’s good. As the naan is finished and arranged on the tables with the condiments, people sat, ate together and talked more. Gently, Jasleen prompted people, eliciting more stories. ‘When I was young in Morocco, my grandma would give me three breads to take to be baked in the oven. When I came back with one, she asked me ‘where’s my bread?’ I had given one to the neighbour and one went to the baker.’

When the food was eaten, and tables cleared, Alex and Jemma handed out large sheets of paper and people convened into small groups to continue the discussion. The talk was about the culture of food and notes were taken on the sheets of paper.

Below are a few examples from the notes:

— No matter how small your kitchen, you cook en masse
— Moroccan culture—weddings, birthdays, baby showers, making dough a communal event, baker paid tip in bread, smell reminds me of making bread together, cook big batches for poorer children
— Extra cooker and gas
— Chicken in bathtub
— So much more than just food
— Food goes to mosque to distribute
— Kitchen a place to have arguments…

Another woman entered and joined in the conversation before collecting her children from the nursery: ‘At home, lunch is a big thing. Even children come home from school for lunch. Everyone sits around one table and eat from the table. No one has a separate plate…’ Sheila, is thinking about bread, ‘Like my nan. She always made her own bread. Do you make your own bread?’ ‘No! I don’t have time. When I get back from work and the children…When I was a small child, my grandmother would give me a small bit of dough.’ Jasleen, ‘To play with?’ ‘Yes.’ The conversation turned towards managed time for cooking, whether people buy ready-made meals or do their own cooking. The newcomer says she can cook at weekends. It’s about ‘life values.’ The group talk about the culture of sharing food, ‘She made her own noodles and, if she doesn’t give you some of it, it’s rude.’ ‘You respect your neighbour…It’s so much more than food.’ Jasleen: ‘How do you keep that going?’ They talk about passing the culture on through their children, but it gets harder and harder to sustain. Jasleen contributed, talking about making chapatis from scratch with her mother. Her mother would make them quickly and perfectly round
and thin, and hers were never so perfect, but her mother never minded.
A woman with a small baby is standing. ‘It’s good for us to speak English, to practise our English.’
Much of the conversation between the women when they’ve been preparing the food had been in Arabic.
Jasleen: ‘Everything you talked about was about community.
And about feeling…
‘Here, everything is different, different times.’

It was the end of the session and people prepared themselves and their children for going out into the cold and snow.
As the room is cleared, Jasleen said that she would have liked the discussion to have been ‘more political’. Yet, so far, the making and sharing of food had achieved one of the main objectives—the sharing of personal stories and cultural backgrounds, as well as the making of a convivial, inclusive and shared culture in the Drop-In centre. A convivial atmosphere had been created, Anton offered, and perhaps a step towards steering the direction of discussion towards more affecting political issues. In all, it could be seen about the micro-politics of community and everyday life.

Leila is leading the bread-making in the following session. It’s a role that she clearly enjoys—and she asks everyone to ‘wash hands.’ This week, the recipe is rghaife that can have a savoury meat filling, or cheese, or plain with sweet stuff such as honey.

Again, there’s a little tension when it’s suggested that the mixing up of these ingredients is shared between all those present. There are 14 or so women here this week with their babies and toddlers.
A woman from last week’s session, the one who liked the chance to ‘practise her English’, arrives with her toddler and she breaks into song. Others join in which ends with gleeful ululating—a celebration of a friend’s new baby.
It’s very tiny, just a couple of weeks old.
Tables were arranged in an L-shape. Leila, clearly enjoying herself in the role of session leader, grins at Anton and exclaims, ‘Masterchef!’

When the food is ready, Drop-In worker Fahada announced, ‘Everyone, ok. We’re going to tidy up and eat. All together…’ There’s emphasis on this last phrase. She and Sheila start to shift tables, making a long table.
One of the parents spontaneously burst into a song in Arabic, banging on a drum. It was a praise song for the parent with her new baby. When the singing is over, and people have started eating, Jasleen talked about how they had had an interesting conversation last week about how people ‘grew up with food’. She

 referred to a point made the previous week about not cooking every day because there wasn’t enough time. Conversations started popping up between people around the table, so Jasleen intervened gently, saying that she’d like to be able to hear everyone.

A woman talks in Arabic, apparently referring to last week’s conversation, translating the points made. There is the odd non-Arabic word—‘microwave’ and ‘pizza’. Someone offered the comment that ‘our husbands work hard, so it’s important that when they come home, they have some food, some fresh food.’

Jasleen asked, ‘Do you feel a pressure to do that?’ to various ‘Nos’ in response. Again, separate discussions popped up around the table. Jasleen said that she didn’t want to impose the order, or what to do next, she wanted people to decide as a group, wanted to listen to everybody as much as we could. ‘We don’t want to put any pressure on anyone to perform!’
She and Alex will take notes of what is said.
The woman who translated talked about going to Asda as a family outing, and elaborates on how it was family time at the weekend, and how as kids they really enjoyed going as a whole family.

Jasleen: ‘It’s hard because everyone has different memories… I think food is very expensive…’ After a little more talk, it was time to finish eating and talking and to clear up.

When parents and children had left, there is brief time for reflection and review.
Jasleen thought that ‘a lot happened today’ and goes on to say that, ‘It was nice to speak with other mums—there was someone new kneading dough. It was nice to be social with other mums.’ Fahada thought it was a ‘bit like hell’s kitchen.’ Sue was clearly thinking about the singing and notes that ‘it’s hard to make it inclusive…’ The dynamic takes over. ‘Picking up on the woman that spontaneously took the role of translator, Jasleen thinks that it an essential role, especially if everyone is to feel included. Sue was a little concerned about timing—there is an After-School Club in the same space immediately after the Drop-In session, so clearing up really needed to have started earlier.

For the next session, learning from the previous session, Jasleen took the lead from the outset and announced that the recipe is going to be chapatis—a simple mixture of wholemeal and white flour, and water. Tables were arranged in a square, with people facing each other. More children were involved, playing with the dough in this session. It is a quick and easy recipe. Again, there was the preparation of raita and the doling out of pickles and chutneys from jars to accompany the chapatis. The woman that made the lemon, salt and cumin relish was at it again—a refreshing but mouth-puckering experience.

Food was this time distributed on tables that were arranged during the cooking and small groups convened around them to eat and discuss. Jasleen, Jemma and Alex had written out questions on large sheets of paper that Jemma taped to the tables:
I help mum
Sharing experience and ideas
Ring a friend for help and support
Share every day with children
Teach my child to care for others
When I gave birth, others came to help me—my mother came for one month and cooked me meals every day, and the next month, my friends cooked for me. Friends can help in hard times. It’s how I avoided post-natal depression
It’s part of our culture. My brothers help me.
Someone always gives back
Spending the weekend with my family. They look after me and I can switch off from being a housewife. It shows how they appreciate you.
Making a special occasion, a celebration…

At 3.00pm, tidying up took place. In the discussion that took place afterwards, Sheila is happier and commented, ‘It worked out better today. Much calmer. There was a new mum. She wasn’t sure whether this is the right day for her to come…Her child was covered in flour.’ She goes on to talk about how the mother wasn’t sure at first and then relaxed. Jasleen thought that the recipe ‘was a collective thing’. There was appreciation about the arrangement of tables in the space, it worked much better.

The following week, the recipe was Welsh cakes and it too worked well. There were fewer parents and children there, however. Jasleen was unsettled—there were rumours going around social media about ‘punish a Muslim’ day and this was a reason that there was reduced attendance. For those that attended, they said that they would either stay at home, or wear hats instead of their hijabs.

The week after was the final session with patties on the menu.
The group on this afternoon appeared to have a wider cultural mixture than in previous sessions. Again, the tables are arranged in a square for preparation and then broken up into small tables for discussion. When the food was ready, placed on the tables and most had eaten, Jasleen raised her voice over the hubbub:

‘How do you care?’
‘How are you cared for?’
Fahada was recruited to translate and write the questions in Arabic.

Reflections from previous sessions had been put into action, with a more social and inclusive arrangement in space and sequence of activity. Food was laid out attractively and placed on tables.

From some of the notes taken on individual tables:
Share—prepare a meal
About human nature
Culturally specific
Basic care
Friends and family
At work—colleagues
If someone is upset, asking how they are
Listening
People help
Look after each other
Asking about what Jasleen was thinking about in terms of producing something from the project, perhaps to disseminate something of the project, she said:

“I'm thinking about a picnic… A means of taking the project out of the centre what we've been doing. What makes a picnic? A sheet that you sit on. A public space. A picnic blanket has a conventional size. It's very polite. I want to make it an 'unpolite' size. A blanket 20m²—what would it do in a public space? It is how nourishment can be protest…”

This time, along with questions about how parents could be supported, Jasleen had prepared some prompt cards to help focus discussion:

- ESOL classes
- Children
- Rebuild ourselves
- Educate mothers about British system
- Being able to talk to others takes away pressures
- Go to the top, to Westminster Council
- Helping to teach mothers about getting out of depression
- High-rises bad for isolation
- How do I get back to work?
- Mothers and children learning how to play and supervise play
- Extending ourselves

In the reflection after the participants had left, Jasleen wanted to talk about the conversation at her table. 'Their voices need to be heard at another level, to become something bigger.' Jemma said that there ought to be some way to go to the top. This is a ‘free space for children and women.' Alex observed how women with new babies are so easily isolated and overwhelmed…'it's almost the same conversation we were having four weeks ago.'

The curation team thought that there was an opportunity to go public, to give a space for the women's voices at an event at this year's Pavilion at the Serpentine—it fitted with the theme which was 'Radical Kitchen'. A planning session for this was held a few weeks later at the Portman Centre. Before the event at the Pavilion, the education curators invited Jasleen to speak at a conference—Rights to the City—arranged by the Serpentine's Education and Projects team at Conway Hall in central London. Jasleen writes and gives a short presentation at the conference.

Meeting with Jasleen after this event and before her workshop at the Serpentine Pavilion, Anton had a conversation with her to garner her reflections after some space and time. Jasleen talks about doing the project in another's working space. “Being in the space—Sheila's workspace, the place that parents, mothers come with their children, Fahada, who took such pleasure in leading the bread-making… I realised the project became important to people… I didn’t want to upset or offend people. It took half of the 10 weeks to get to it… Phase two was about how objects and material shape a space, make space…

The act of eating together, nourishment, it's not a performance”

Jasleen talked about the important role played by education curator, Alex and her assistant, Jemma. “I never felt steered by Alex and Jemma… Alex is an amazing teacher—she wants it to come from you… She provides a scaffold, is very tactful.”

15 From a conversation with Jasleen Kaur, 31 May 2018
The Moving Up programme worked with Year 6 children (10-11-years-old) from Gateway Academy Primary School, located off Lisson Grove close to Church Street and drawing its students from the surrounding area. The students at Gateway derive from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. A large proportion of the intake have English as an additional language (EAL) and 57% of students are eligible for free school meals, indicating a high level of those who come from low income households.\textsuperscript{16}

Taking place towards the end of their final year at Gateway, the aim of the Moving Up project, developed from discussion with teachers at the school, was to help students prepare for their transition to secondary school the following September. In May 2016, the third year that Moving Up had run with students from Gateway Academy, the project ran for four days and was visited over two of the days by field researcher Anton Franks. A month later, Anton visited the school and interviewed the lead teacher for Year 6 and talked with a small focus group of students. In addition, an online questionnaire was designed and administered to the students and completed by 70 students out of the 90 participating in the Moving Up workshops.

In her response to the question of how the project came about with the Serpentine, there was evidence from the Year 6 lead teacher of how the Serpentine’s team had been proactive in making a relationship with the school:

\begin{quote}
The Serpentine initially approached us, and I was passed the details by our Headteacher: The first year we did it, we had quite a challenging year group of children who needed a lot of preparation to get them ready for secondary school. And we thought it would be a really nice way to get them to think about it. Not just from a school point of view, but more from an arty, feelings point of view. So, the children had a chance to express their feelings outside of a classroom. The children…had quite a few emotional needs. Talking about how they felt going to secondary school, or their relationships with friends or adults wasn’t always easy for them. So, at first we worked with an artist who expressed their feelings through puppets. And we performed a show. Also, that artist had also produced a film that was in Arabic, so lots of our children could resonate with that and it really helped them to engage with it.
\end{quote}

(From interview with lead teacher of Year 6, 17 June 2016)

The way in which the Serpentine curatorial team commissioned artists with particular skills to meet the requirements of the children, after discussion with teachers who are familiar with the children, is also evident in what the teacher reported.

For Moving Up in 2016, Adam James was the commissioned artist. Anton interviewed Adam on the phone before and after the project. Originally studying for a fine art degree at the Royal College of Art, Adam had previously done printmaking and worked in film, but latterly had...
I've always [made] work that's involved my body as a means to generating an image, at some point I started thinking less about the image and more about performing, which led me to work a lot with groups.

(From phone interview with Adam James, 16 May 2016)

The project venue was the Cockpit Theatre, a studio theatre and community arts facility, just off Church Street market and very close to Gateway Academy. Previously, Moving Up projects had taken place at the school, but the teacher thought it useful that the project in 2016 had been relocated outside the school:

This year we went to the Cockpit Theatre, which was most successful because obviously there is more space. And there are a lot of children. It allows the children to prioritise it as well because when they're still in school in the hall, if there's wet play or another lesson coming in, then there's more demands on their time. Whereas, we just had a space...

(From interview with lead teacher of Year 6, 17 June 2016)

**Session 1: making creatures, exchanging gifts**

In this, the first session of the project, Adam and his colleague James had marked out coloured circles on the floor of the studio, each encircling a number of t-shirts of the same colour. Half of the year group in Year 6, around 40 children, were present in the morning session—in the afternoon the other half would be participating.

Around the edge of the studio, small sheets of paper were laid out, each showing an abstract symbol. The symbols, Adam explained, were used by American ‘hobos’ to leave messages to others. They were chosen because of their abstract nature which Adam assumed lacked any existing connotation for the children.

The children entered with some excitement, accompanied by three adults (teachers and teaching assistants). Adam introduced himself and James, and then outlined the session with clarity and enthusiasm, grabbing the attention of the children. There was then a warm-up activity in which the children ran around greeting each other with handshakes and then were asked to go into pairs and to make ‘body sculptures’.

Adam next pointed out the symbols laid out around the edge of the studio. He asked the children to select one that meant something to the children about how they were feeling about the future. Once selected, the children were instructed to go around and show their chosen symbols to others and, from this, to form groups based on whether they thought the symbols were similar in some way. Four groups were formed, each with around eight students, and they were allocated a coloured circle and a matching coloured t-shirt.

In their groups, the children were then asked to make a ‘creature’ that included them all, then to work out a way to move, and then to give the creature a ‘voice’, making sounds but without words. Movement and sound were then combined as the children’s creatures moved around the room and met other creatures. Once each group’s creature had greeted every other creature, the groups were asked to devise a (imaginary) gift that they could exchange with other groups.

Finally, Adam led a brief activity designed to allow the children to divest themselves of their creature roles, after which the whole class was asked to reflect on the activities and to think about how they may relate to their transition to secondary school.

**Session 2: making flags and shelters**

The next day, when the children entered the studio, the coloured circles were again marked out on the floor of the studio. This time, there was the addition of a square marked out with lengths of paper in the middle of the floor.

Next to the circles, Adam and James had laid out trays of materials, each set different. For the first part of the session, the materials were covered over with a piece of canvas.

As the children entered, Adam asked them to gather around, sitting just outside the central square of paper. He told a short story that made a narrative link with the first session that had taken place the previous day. Time had passed, and the creatures had evolved into communities, each with their own set of rules and ways of living. The ultimate aim of this session was to construct a shelter together for themselves.

Before the construction of the shelter, however, the children were asked to find a section of paper in the square and to make a drawing of how they imagined a school in the future.

After going around to look at everyone’s drawings, Adam instructed them to form the groups they had been in the previous day’s session and to go back to their coloured circles. They were asked not to talk, but to make up gestures—a sign language—and to communicate using the gestures. Later, they would be allowed to talk. The trays of materials, including cloth, bamboo sticks, coloured tape and felt pens, were then uncovered and they were asked to make a flag that represented their group creatures. At this stage, there were varying degrees of success for the children in keeping to sign-language without spoken words. After constructing and raising their flags, the children reflected on how the flag represented different aspects of their communities.

In the next part of the session, more materials were provided, including more fabric, cardboard tubes, sheets of corrugated cardboard, washing-line cord and so forth. The children were invited to work together to construct a shelter for their community in a different corner of the studio.
and, once completed, to plant their flags. There was great excitement and frenzied activity as the children were given a time-limit for construction. Once the shelters had been completed, they had a chance to go around and inspect other groups’ shelters. Following the tour of shelters, they all were then asked to construct a shelter in the centre of the square for the whole group. In the session Anton observed, once this had been completed, one child asked if they could demolish the shelters. The class went to this task with great energy and alacrity. Fortunately, it ended safely, with no injuries.

Finally, there was time to reflect, first in small groups that then opened out into a plenary session for the whole group to reflect.

Reflecting on Moving Up with Adam James
Commenting on Adam’s Moving Up project, the Year 6 lead teacher was asked to reflect on this year’s project and commented positively:

To begin with I was a little apprehensive because he was asking them to be really imaginative and it was quite open-ended, whereas in school normally the lessons are a lot more structured and a lot more scaffolded. But the children responded really well. The thing that we all liked the most was when they came back, they could all see which parts of the activity they could apply and what skills they’d used that would be successful for secondary school. But also, it made them reflect on how they interact with each other, how they approach new activities and new challenges. And also, it allowed them to bond as a class. Because we often stream. So, children are together in groups and there’s not a lot of fluid movement.

( Interview with lead teacher of Year 6, 17 June 2016)

Asked if teachers had led any kind of reflection on the project when the children were back at school, she said that the children had done this spontaneously for themselves:

The children initiated conversations—it might have been a registration time, or in the playground duty. But the children wanted to talk about it. They took ownership of the project which was really good. .The children using their imagination was really good…

I’d like just to say thank you to Alex and the Serpentine for helping our children with their transition projects. It’s been really great to work with them—they’ve all been very professional and lovely. I don’t think anyone would have anything other than positive things to say.

( Interview with lead teacher of Year 6, 17 June 2016)

Reflecting on the project with a small focus of students a month after the Moving Up project, the students were encouraged to talk about the parts of the project they enjoyed:

—Working together and creating an animal
—How we cooperated
—Making the big building
—All of the groups, all of us working together and making a whole building
—What things we can do by ourselves and what we can do together
—And what friends at secondary school should be like

Then, how the project might have helped them in thinking about moving to secondary school after the summer vacation:

—Because you’re, like, working with other people and you might have challenges
—And you might leave your friends
—Yeah, and you have to make friends
—And be helpful

(From Year 6 focus group, 17 June 2016)

The focus group meeting interrupted the children’s preparation for their farewell show and they were keen to get on with their rehearsals, so their answers were noticeably brief. The table below illustrates indicative results from the online survey of the children conducted after the focus group and giving a little more detail to their responses:

**Moving Up Survey**
**June 2016**

We are very interested in what you thought about participating in Moving Up…% 

| What did you enjoy the most? (you can select more than one option) | 59% |
| Making things and structures out of materials | 55% |
| Making creatures in groups with our bodies | 50% |
| Playing games | 32% |

| Did you think it changed your feelings about going to secondary school? |
| Yes | 38% |
| Maybe | 41% |
| Not at all | 21% |

| What was the purpose of the activities? (you can select more than one option) |
| Going to a new place | 45% |
| Making new friends | 55% |
| Working together and supporting each other | 45% |
| Finding different ways to communicate | 32% |
Did you enjoy Session 1?
A lot  39%
A bit  54%
Not at all  5%

Did you enjoy Session 2?
A lot  84%
A bit  13%
Not at all  3%

Would you like to take part in similar activities again?
Yes  76%

Was this a good way of helping you prepare for going to secondary school?
Yes  70%

Note: Percentages rounded up. N=70, one student did not respond to all questions.

Talking with Adam on the phone two months after the project, he was somewhat tentative and self-critical—more so than the children or their teacher had been. Ultimately, however, he was positive about it as a learning experience for the children and for himself:

The second session was a bit of an experiment and exploration…The first session I developed out of something I’d done elsewhere, I felt more confident in applying it and using it as a point of departure and developing some kind of playful rapport. But the second session was a complete mystery to me… I’ve done something a little bit similar when I ran it with adults, but it was completely anarchic…I felt it was a bit of a failure…

It was kind of a test-bed. Every time I do these things, I’m refining my ability to refine something or bring them into a space, whatever ability or disability…it was an amazing privileged opportunity to push something in an amazing space…

I heard kids talking about things that I thought they might not get… it seems like they’d overcome something… being in a new place… trusting that some things would fall into place. In the moment, it seemed like a failure, but actually it was a success… When I thought that things would fall apart and teetering on chaos, I stopped and asked them how we could make this work…

By saying teetering on chaos, that’s what I mean, because a lot of activities lent themselves to letting things go and letting a lot of stuff out…It needs a teeny bit of boundaries, but not too much, so there’s always a tension between it being too much, too wild, not bad wild, the enjoyment that you get from letting things go, that’s always short-lived and lacking a clear direction…

Asked what he thought about the working relationship with the Serpentine’s education curators, he was unequivocally positive, talking of the uniqueness of the experience:

I’ve never worked with a curator in this sort of way. When I’ve made things before, I’ve been left much more to my own devices. There’s not been a need before to pin down objectives and outcomes… Alex was great with that… The direction from Alex Thorp there was much more focused on debrief and the post-activity and then relating it back to the project’s objectives…

I think that Alex trusted me to make abstract connections…and streamlining of concepts… I appreciated was how Alex thought about how we bring it back and get the children to reflect to tease out the value of those things. (From phone interview with Adam James, 29 July 2016)

The evidence from this and other projects involving different artists is the mediating role that the Serpentine education curator takes. The reflective role is borne out of experience of working with groups of children and artists over time.

Since the project, Adam James led a series of workshops for school children at the Serpentine Galleries17 and has worked with the education team to produce a pack based on the work18 that serves to disseminate the work he and his colleague James did with the children of Gateway Academy.

Case Studies & Essay Volume 2

Just one iteration of the Youth Forum programme was sampled in the autumn of 2016 as part of the evaluation research reported on here. Youth Forum is an ongoing programme that has been running for a number of years in partnership with Westminster Academy and is scheduled to take place for students in Year 10 (14- and 15-years-old) in two slots designated by the school as ‘internship’ fortnights. Broadly, the slots tend to fall in the middle of the Autumn term and, later in the school year, toward the end of the Spring term. For each iteration, different artists are commissioned, often working in pairs or as part of a team. For this particular iteration, two artists—Barby Asante and Teresa Cisneros—were commissioned.

Barby Asante is an artist, curator, educator and occasional DJ. Teresa sees herself as more of a curator than an artist. Originally from North America, Teresa described herself as a ‘Chicana’, was educated in philosophy, has a background in arts administration, and has ‘always worked with young people.’ She is interested in the ‘politics of ideology and the history of contemporary art’. Barby, who teaches at the University of Arts London alongside her own art work and working with the community groups, told Anton that she is interested in theory and collaboration. Her approach is critical, particularly ‘critique of the institution, whichever institution’, applying ‘colonial and post-colonial theory’. In relation to Youth Forum, she was interested in ‘the radicalisation of young people’, of how they can express their critique through ‘art and politics’.19

For a few of the students, enrolment on the programme is their choice—an elective—while others are encouraged to apply by the school, often because the school’s assessment is that the students are struggling with school in some way. Broadly, selection for the project is connected with ways in which the young people are integrated into the life of the school and the wider community. School staff, students and education curators come to an agreement that some of the young people may benefit from Youth Forum rather than being give a more ‘traditional’ work placement, e.g. in a shop, office or workshop. The Serpentine’s education team articulate the benefits of Youth Forum as supporting young people with confidence, communication and critical thinking.

The table below gives an overview of activities involving the young people in the Youth Forum project. It covers only the period from September 2016 to February 2017. Its content is taken from talking with the education team, meeting the artists and observing the project. Its purpose is to give a sense of the scheme of the project as a holistic process, not simply a timeline, but to give some insight, albeit brief, into the thinking and planning that has gone into the project. At the same time, it is neither comprehensive nor exhaustive—but it is clear that much work goes on (before, during and after the project) that is represented here.

19 Quotes from pre-project discussion with Teresa Cisneros and Barby Asante, 17 October 2016
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>When</th>
<th>What and where</th>
<th>Who</th>
<th>How and why</th>
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<tr>
<td>Early autumn</td>
<td>Confirming final arrangements</td>
<td>Education curators</td>
<td>Final adjustments</td>
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<td>Meeting with commissioned artists</td>
<td>School liaison</td>
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<td>Meeting with students at Westminster Academy</td>
<td>Artists</td>
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<td>15 Young people</td>
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<td>31 October</td>
<td>Youth Forum project</td>
<td>Young people</td>
<td>Arts practices; guiding</td>
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<td>– 11</td>
<td>Cockpit Theatre</td>
<td>Artists</td>
<td>and instructing</td>
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<td>November</td>
<td>Group and individual work</td>
<td>Education curators</td>
<td>Providing materials</td>
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<td>2016</td>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>Researcher</td>
<td>and resources</td>
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<td>Keeping journals/diaries</td>
<td>Cockpit staff</td>
<td>Crafting</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Deciding on topics to be included in ‘Lexicon of Labour’ an A–Z</td>
<td>Film maker</td>
<td>Developing group</td>
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<td>Collaging</td>
<td>Book designer</td>
<td>identity</td>
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<td>Drama vignettes – planning, rehearsing performing</td>
<td>Academy Principal</td>
<td>Supporting individuals</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Day visit to Tate Modern</td>
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<td>Sharing ethos of project</td>
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<td>(for research)</td>
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<td>Discussing expectations</td>
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<td>Lighting</td>
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<td>Coordinating between</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Planning the book: form, content, layout</td>
<td></td>
<td>young people, artists</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Photographing people in local area</td>
<td></td>
<td>and site staff etc.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Producing GIFs from images of labour taken by young people (using GIF-maker)</td>
<td>(Education curators)</td>
<td>(Education curators)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Celebratory lunch (in local Lebanese Restaurant)</td>
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<td>Mediating: aims of project</td>
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<td>March 2017</td>
<td>Another iteration of Youth Forum took place in a two-week work experience slot.</td>
<td>Support from artist</td>
<td>individuals and group</td>
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<td></td>
<td>N.B. It was not visited as part of this research and evaluation project.</td>
<td>Barby Asante and</td>
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<td></td>
<td>It is, however, mentioned and talked about positively in participants’ comments</td>
<td>education curators</td>
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<td>at the end of this case study</td>
<td>Alex Thorp and</td>
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<td>Ben Messih</td>
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<td>April 2017</td>
<td>Workshop with all Year 10 students at Westminster Academy</td>
<td>Young people</td>
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<td>lead activities</td>
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In the following section, findings are arranged under headings that reflect analytical and interpretative categories emerging from the research and evaluation process. The categories have emerged from an iterative review of the evidence collected, mostly in the form of field notes and some images. Field notes are taken from talking with education curators, artists and the young people, and from three days observation when the process of Youth Forum was sampled—days that were selected in liaison with the education curator.

**Young people and art-making**

The students were engaged in arts-based activities, working with artists, within artistic frameworks and towards artistic objectives and outcomes. The project provoked critical ways of thinking about, and responding to, the world of work, its relationships and structures, employing different modes and media of the arts that enable the young people to select, shape and form ideas, with the sense of communicating perceptions, ideas and attitudes to others in creative ways. Talking to some of the young people who had elected to come on the project rather than do more traditional work placements, it was apparent that they like doing arts-based work and that, especially under the constraints of curriculum approaching GCSEs, they had reduced access to arts on the curriculum.

In this project, arts work included making collages, taking words and images from magazines and from the internet, developing, performing and filming short vignettes, writing playlists, writing letters to a younger self and so forth. Meeting in a circle in the morning Barby, who described herself as trained as a ‘print artist’, told the group that they had ‘decided to keep within the tight discipline of collage’. These images would ultimately feed into the compilation and construction of a ‘Lexicon of Labour’, an A–Z of labour, to be published in a book form within the year.

Working towards a real product, one made and designed through negotiation among participants and aimed at audiences within and beyond the school, was clearly important both to the young people, the artists and the Serpentine. On the last day of the first fortnight, choosing a title and doing some initial planning for layout and production, anticipating production and distribution of their lexicon, the young people were clearly excited and boosted.

In the first week of the project, Anton visited Youth Forum for the first time. After meeting the lively group of young people in the foyer and bar area of the Cockpit Theatre, the group moved to a studio room on the first floor. It has a mirror arranged on one wall, so is clearly a multi-purpose space, sometimes used as a dance studio. The students are arranged to sit in a circle in the centre of the studio. Behind them, lists of words generated by the young people related to the world of work are taped to the walls. In the following section, findings are arranged under headings that reflect analytical and interpretative categories emerging from the research and evaluation process. The categories have emerged from an iterative review of the evidence collected, mostly in the form of field notes and some images. Field notes are taken from talking with education curators, artists and the young people, and from three days observation when the process of Youth Forum was sampled—days that were selected in liaison with the education curator.

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In the first week of the project, Anton visited Youth Forum for the first time. After meeting the lively group of young people in the foyer and bar area of the Cockpit Theatre, the group moved to a studio room on the first floor. It has a mirror arranged on one wall, so is clearly a multi-purpose space, sometimes used as a dance studio. The students are arranged to sit in a circle in the centre of the studio. Behind them, lists of words generated by the young people related to the world of work are taped to the walls.

Barby: It’s day four. Shall we have a moment of silence?
Student: (a girl, an articulate and vocal presence) Why do we do that?
Barby: Just to come in from outside and reflect on why we’re here.
Alex: (holding up a DSLR) Who’ll take photos? Who doesn’t want to have their photos taken?
Barby continues with a recap of work on the collages so far.
Barby: We decided to keep to the tight discipline of collage... (To the young people) What do you need?

Student: Music.

Ben Messih, assistant education curator, rises and sorts out Spotify on the laptop and speakers.

Barby says she's not talking about music, she wants to know what they need for the collages. After a while, the young people settle down in spaces on the floor of the studio with the collages they have been working on, distributed by the education curators.

In a corner of the room, a girl is working alone on her collage on which she describes a 'cloud of chaos' along the bottom of her image. In the middle is a triangular form. 'Out of chaos into order,' she says. She chose to do this project because she likes art and, second, she couldn't be bothered to find her own work experience. 'Besides, the more relaxed you are, the better work you do,' she says.

Another girl shouts out 'If anybody finds protest things, can you tell me.' She's doing the word 'No' from the list taped on the wall...

In another space, a girl talks to Anton about the collage he is peering at.

Student: I think it gives a wider view of society. Like, a lot of people our age don't think about work in this way. Plus, I really like art.

From time to time, the young people consult with the adults in the room.

The morning session ends, and the students are bought lunch by the Serpentine's education curators which they eat together in the bar area of the Cockpit.

In the afternoon, they divide into pairs and threes and move into doing some drama work, preparing short, improvised themes on the theme of work.

Student: I prefer drama than discussion, it's easier to express my views through drama, but not everyone is a drama student...

The students are clearly having fun. There is laughter.

Barby: You've got to share ideas and work together.

Student: We were exploring ideas at the same time as making a joke...

On the first Friday, they made a visit to Tate Modern, looking at various artworks, observing the kinds of work involved in the gallery and talking with Tate's curators and workers. Later that week, on the last day of this fortnight, they ventured out into the market street nearby, taking digital images of people at work which they brought back to make animated GIFs with—it was rapid, improvised, pleasurable and impressive work that clearly engaged the young people.

Towards the end of this first week and into the second, they continued to work together on short scenes depicting aspects of workplace situations. The film-maker, Anna, who was clearly skilled at working with the
young people, introduced the disciplines and techniques of filming, in terms of angles and shots, allowing those interested to do some filming, for example. Their work on scenes is brief and fragmentary, but after just 15 minutes rehearsing they are ready to show their scenes and have them committed to film. A brief example, taken from field notes, follows below:

Two students, Raul and Afsana, do a scene on ‘ambition’, two scenes, one showing no ambition and the other ambition. They’re very succinct.

Barby: Any feedback?

There’s some talk about timing—it took only about 30 seconds.

Barby suggests a slight pause between ‘unambitious’ and ‘ambitious’ and then exit.

Barby: We can talk about angles later.

Three students perform their scene Edin, Carolina and Ahmed.

Barby: It was really great!

A student gives detailed feedback, telling them ‘Don’t speak unnecessarily.’

Barby: I think I preferred E as the boss—there was a real sassiness to it

It is quite a wordy scene without much action.

**Arts participation and learning**

The young people’s artworks were based not only on their own ideas but emerged out of their dialogue with artists and curators. Over the fortnight they developed a sense that they had, to some extent, entered a community of artistic practice. It is what Lave and Wenger, originators of the concept of communities of practice, refer to as ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991). From another angle, participation in an arts community develops what Eliot Eisner (Eisner, 2005) refers to as ‘connoisseurship’ in the arts—that is, developing senses of appreciation and discernment.

The perception of participation in learning, as compared to being receivers of knowledge(s) imparted by teachers in school, was apparent as the project unfolded. It is of course a generalisation, and not to caricature teaching and learning in school as being predicated on transmission models, but the changes and constraints in curriculum policy have exacerbated a tendency towards teacher-centred instructional models in recent times. As in any collective project involving a range of different participants, however, there developed some wrinkles and ambiguities in roles and relationships, which we shall return to below.

The students were encouraged to draw on their own experiences, resources of knowledge and skill to develop ideas, to plan,
to make, and to show and share artefacts they had made. If the ‘discipline of form’ provided a framework and required the patient development of craft skills, it also allowed the young people to draw substantially on, and to contribute to, their ‘funds of knowledge’ (Moll, 1990).

Observation and discussion with the young people, education curators and the commissioned artists gave clear evidence that art-making activity was greatly valued by the young people. Levels of concentration (or distraction from some) were indicators of levels of engagement and involvement in the project. Overall, a palpable sense of purpose and progress was evident in the various studio spaces at the Cockpit when the young people were making things. They garnered opinions from others, negotiated and reflected. The young people decided that they wanted to share the book with their peers in Year 10. Later, education curators went into school post-project to run a workshop to edit the book collaboratively—all the young people attended, and their comments and feedback were fed back to the artists and designer.

The young people generally felt that they were encouraged to give voice to their ideas, opinions and concerns. However, towards the end of the first stage of this project, some of the young people were eloquent and forthright in a lengthy discussion of some issues that emerged about the way that the group was working. The students were able to maintain a level and balanced approach, presenting opinions and perceptions, and engaging in respectful and mature but nonetheless forthright discourse with adults.

Discussion was centred on complex issues around the respective roles of the young people, the artists and education curators, and the relationships between them. In short, discussion was on the openness to talk together in the planning and progress of the project’s work, issues of mutual respect (namely whether everyone felt there were sufficient opportunities to voice their ideas and opinions), to contribute to the direction of work, and whether the role and responsibilities of artists should be like that of teachers.

The aspiration to have open spaces for more democratic forms of participation, of providing opportunities for young people to lead the process and thus to develop a sense identity and autonomy at points of transition—in this case, between adolescence and adult, and schooling and work—is an ethos of approach deeply held by education curators. In a document outlining the ‘Youth Forum Approach’, shared with the artists and Anton, they clearly set out a philosophy and approach to practice with young people that sharing expectations, entering dialogue, accepting disagreement and so forth. The artists espoused a similar commitment, assisting and enabling the young people to develop a confident sense of identity.

The content and tenor of discussion raised critical questions for reflection, particularly for the artists, on developing relationships within projects. In discussion with the education curators, there were also lessons to be learned that could be fed into the commissioning process.

Nonetheless, it was clear in this project, as with others in the Serpentine Education Programme, that participation in learning processes was not confined to the young people. Ongoing discussion between education curators, commissioned artists and the young
people gave real evidence of learning for all participants, with clear potential for learning to contribute to future development. These included critical reflections on ways of relating to and working with young people and the nature and variety of materials and activities. There were implications in thinking about appropriate pedagogies that might allow the young people to make choices, as well as the boundaries of openness or constraint.

**Place, locality and community**

Places and spaces always have their effects on social relations and social organisation. The venue for the project—The Cockpit Theatre—affects the ways in which the project worked. The strong connotations attached to institutional spaces such as schools, their restraints and constraints, were less easily discernible for the young people. Most of the young people came from high-density housing around the Edgeware and Harrow roads and some rarely travelled outside the area, as the excitement and consternation caused when suggesting they make their own way to Tate Modern on the first Friday revealed.

The choice of venue—neither a school, nor a gallery, but clearly a space for workshopping the arts and doing art-making (with a tradition stretching back 50 years)—signalled a range of things about the project to the young people. Two spaces were used—a dance studio upstairs and the black box studio theatre on the ground floor, both evocative spaces that helped to concentrate a certain sort of attention in the young people. At the same time, it afforded different ways for the young people and adults to relate to one to another.

The evidence of place-based aspects of Youth Forum are interestingly suggestive of ways in which galleries and their relationship to various communities of interest (or uninterest) might be thought about. The strength of gallery-sponsored community-based arts projects is that they extend the space of the gallery beyond its walls, taking art out of specific locations and allowing permeability to members of the community who might not otherwise associate themselves with galleries or choose to visit them. To engage young people in projects beyond the walls of the gallery is both to extend civic engagement and, perhaps, signals a gallery’s greater accessibility. This is something that we will explore further as the programme proceeds.

In April 2017, together with the artists and education curators another stage of the project took place. It promised to be an event celebrating the achievements of the project, presented some performance work, exhibited some of the art work done, and launched their bespoke publication, the *Lexicon of Labour.* This publication was developed from the work that the young people had done over the course of the project, based on words that they had voted to be included that held particular significance and resonance for them.

In April 2017 young people involved in Youth Forum took their project back into their school. Barby Asante was present, leading on and coordinating activity together with Serpentine Galleries’ education curators, Alex Thorp and Ben Messiah. They were going to be working with the whole of the Year 10 group, which was too large to work with in one session, so the workshop was run twice.

Leading off, Barby began the session arranging the group of students into a large circle in one of the larger classrooms, perhaps a year room, while in a neighbouring room a similar activity is led by the education curators:

*Barby:* Tell us about a skill that you have through a gesture.

*Student:* What’s the point of this?

*Barby:* Some students don’t think they have a skill. Barby asked a student what she learnt on her work experience.

**Student 1:** I learnt to work with young children.

**Student 2:** Reaching high places.

**Student 3:** Got good at coding.

Another is ‘very organised’

As the round continues, the term ‘hard-working’ comes up frequently.

The participants next give a brief outline of their experience of Youth Forum:

*Barby:* When we were together for about four weeks…we did a lot of research about work.

*Student 4:* In the first two weeks, we made a ‘lexicon’ or dictionary.

*Barby:* A lexicon is more annotated.

*Student:* We had 26 words, letters of the alphabet and over two weeks we designed a book which will be published in May.

*Barby:* We did it through collages, we did scenes and made a film.

*Student 5:* We did a performance in two weeks… The students encourage their peers to talk about their work experience.

*Student 6:* I worked with an architect.

*Student 7:* I worked in a shop.

*Barby:* What did you do?

*Student 7:* I worked with shoes—tagging, labelling and arranging.

Another worked in a preschool and so forth…
The Youth Forum participants later show their collages, and materials are provided for their peers to do their own. Talking with a group working on their collage, one student is articulate about the purposes of the art project:

‘It’s about how people can express themselves, how they might be discriminated against, or getting along with other people.’

There are mixed feelings about how the session in school went. It was the first day back in the summer term and, at times, it felt as if the young participants along with the artist Barby and the education curators had to work hard to keep the wider cohort of young people with them.

After the workshops, researcher Anton Franks, took the opportunity to talk with some of the Youth Forum participants. Asked what they learned or got out of the project, students responded:

I remember we got off to a slow start at the beginning…we started doing things at the end of the [first] week and the last week was hectic because we had to get the book finished.

Everything was good, we first got to know each other and then they came and helped us with our ideas and we felt more comfortable.

Going to the Tate Modern and having a look at the art there—found that all really interesting. All the art we saw in the gallery was all regarding work and it was very nice to see the contrast between our work and the artists’ work.

We had to plan the pages of the book, me and M were doing design, and I like doing design.

We went on the real Serpentine Gallery where they work…they let us know, the workers, what they do and stuff. They made us go on trips…The second trip was the ICA and we got to know new art.

I learnt about the zero hours contract is…I was made aware of it, so I won’t sign one of those.

They helped me with my new communication skills a lot. I learnt a lot of new words, like ‘wages’—to be honest, I didn’t know what that was, I knew what it means but I didn’t know the word of it, so I understand it now.

Making the book the performance for the second [in March]. In the second one [in March]…we did something to help us connect all together—we sat down in pairs and stared in each other’s for a whole five minutes. And it was so hard for me because I’m laughy, so it took me ten goes, but I finally got it.

As asked about what they learned about art and art-making in particular, they responded:

I learnt more about the art world, how it is to work in a gallery. Like I never knew that in a gallery there are so many jobs—you can be a curator, I never knew about that.

In this second one [in March] it was more about art—I never knew there were artists who actually performed in galleries until we did it ourselves and got to research artists who actually do it.

When asked if the participants had any advice for the Serpentine staff for future projects, they offered:

Everything was good, we first got to know each other and then they came and helped us with our ideas and we felt more comfortable.

I didn’t think they can do any better, just to carry and do this project.

The impact of the Youth Forum project is apparent in the young people’s verbal responses and from the outcomes and processes of the project itself. There was a strong sense of collaboration and their role in the co-construction of the project and its outcomes, both in the publication The Lexicon of Labour in its potential for distribution locally, nationally and internationally, and from their workshop with peers and teachers, within the world and culture of their school. The regime and culture of schooling that these young people have experienced is determinedly hierarchical, being led by adults and circumscribed by a centrally imposed and prescriptive curriculum and assessment system. In a similar sense to the ways in which the Serpentine education programme’s projects extends the boundaries and role of the gallery, the Youth Forum projects clearly developed the young people’s perspectives beyond the boundaries and constraints of schooling. It provided them with crucial insights into a world beyond the school into the wider world, including the world of work, through creative, artistic and multimodal means of communication. In the process, they were able to develop a sense of agency and personhood, giving them opportunities for their ‘voices’ to be heard, expressing their ways of thinking and communicating, and ascribing status to their particular perspectives.
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But it’s more than that,’ said Hans Ulrich Obrist, Artistic Director of Serpentine Galleries, speaking about the art of curation in the interview quoted from in the above extract. It is clear that the role of curator and its definition are expansive and expandable. Indeed, curation is now widely applied: to the management of data, for example digital and otherwise, or to the putting together of programmes of music, and so forth. It is not the first time that the concept of care has been explored in arts practice and written about under the auspices of Serpentine Galleries (Graham, 2012). In Art + Care the focus was on care in a variety community-based arts projects with elders in different communities in London.

On the Serpentine Galleries’ website, members of the education team are listed as ‘curators’, with Alex Thorp as ‘Education Curator’ and Jemma Egan and Joanna Slusarczyk as ‘Assistant Education Curators’. So, in this brief meditation, the focus is on how research and evaluation of the education programme might add some breadth and depth to defining the scope of curation in the context of art and education in concept and in practice—that is, the praxis of education curation in community-based arts education projects.

Based on research evidence from participant observation, from talking with participants and more formal interviews, the focus is on the roles of the education curators. In particular instances, the role of commissioned artists might also be seen to merge with curation. A sense of curation as care-taking, either in managing a public facility for the care of bodies as in the Roman bath attendant, or as the curate or carer of souls in medieval times—albeit in a much more secular and humanistic sense—might find relevance here. Again, however, curation may well consist of more than that, as a few short examples below might help to illustrate.

The work of Nell Noddings (N. Noddings, 2012; N. Noddings, 2013) is prominent in defining and exploring the ethos of care in education, specifically the place and enactment of care in teaching. Some broad aspects on Noddings’ work may be relevant and helpful in situating the concept and practices of care in the context of community-based arts education work. Put briefly, the emphasis in Noddings is on the face-to-face affective aspects of care through which an ethos of care is demonstrated in practice. In the first place, care necessarily involves attentiveness and receptiveness to others on the part of the care-taker, driven by a desire to help. It is, therefore, deeply rooted and implicated in social relationships, requiring a listening and watchful attitude and a sense of empathy for others and sensitivity to their expressed or implicit needs. Secondly, a caring attitude is made most manifest in the ‘care-takers’ willingness to reflect on others’ needs and desires and then to respond constructively. ‘Care-fullness’ is evident not just in individual acts, but in responsive and sustained activity over a period of time and is, in this way, dynamic and developmental. The pedagogic relation between a teacher and those she is teaching can be seen to be implicit in such a developmental attitude. As in the relation of teacher to student, or adult to
child, the relationship of care-giver to the receiver of care is likely to be an unequal relationship, involving inequalities of power. It will require for the care-giver to understand that care for the cared-for may not be directly reciprocated. In this way, the giving and reception of care has its physical, cognitive and affective dimensions.

It is crucial to the success of community-based arts work that relationships of trust and mutual interest are established and sustained. Arguably, this is particularly important when engaging with educational institutions, bound as they are within parameters of their commitment and responsibility to children and their families, balanced alongside the requirements and possible constraints of education and social policy. Here Jo White, the Head of Portman Early Childhood Centre, talks about her initial contact with Education Curator Alex Thorp in setting up the ‘Changing Play’ project:

Jo: I’ve never actually asked Alex how she turned up at my door. But she did, and we had an immediate affinity because…she knew a bit about Reggio Emilia [a student-centred educational philosophy], which was a place that I thought offered something richer than even the very high-quality education we have in this country—or did have. And Reggio Emilia has been a part of my life for a many, many years. So, this was the connection…between Alex and I. And I cherish the day she walked in the door, because it has given us the opportunity to be sort of, not serious researchers, but researchers. It’s given us the opportunity to think about things, see what works, look at it assess it, evaluate it, and change what we do.

(Interview with Jo White, 6 July 2018)

Evident here is more than a commonly held interest between Alex, Jo, and her work: there is a sense of care for and sensitivity to the ethos of centre and Jo’s interests on Alex’s part. There is, in addition, evidence of care taken for the professional development needs of Jo and her staff, the project providing an opportunity not only to engage in a creative arts project that expanded their curricular activity, but also to engage in active reflection on and in action (Schön, 1991).

In many respects, Jo’s comments corroborate and validate the values that Education Curator Alex expresses at the meeting that initiated this research and evaluation project of the education programme. She talks about the ‘challenge and time it takes to build up networks’. It’s important to take time because she wants to ‘avoid parachuting in’ and doing a project on and for a school or centre. Part of the intention is about ‘inviting people to do co-research…It’s not for the Serpentine to develop proposals, but to co-develop work…after building familiarity with the values of the centre and its community’ (from field notes, 9 June 2016).

Ongoing involvement of the curators in developing the work of ‘Changing Play with the children and the staff of the Portman Centre was also reflected in discussion with Albert Potrony after the first iteration of the project observed as part of the research and evaluation. Prior to the first observation, chiming with Noddings’ emphasis on the centrality of listening and responsiveness in relationships of care, Alex is clear in prioritising ‘listening as a radical act’ and that it is important to ‘let the children lead’ and to see ‘how things change in the process’ of work with the young children in the nursery at the Portman Centre (discussion with Education Curator, Alex Thorp, 9 June 2016).

Basically, this constellation of constant checking up what’s going on, collectively trying to make sense, feeding each with other things. I would try things and Alex sort of would come across, I thought that was really rich in this project…The way that [Alex and Ben] are fully engaged, fully on board. It’s almost like it’s a collaboration…Most of the time, you’re not working in a vacuum [on other projects]…but it’s not often that you’ll find constant checking in and exchange

(Interview with Albert Potrony, 22 July 2016)

What Albert expresses here in identifying the relationship between artist and education curator as one of ‘constant checking and exchange’ is how the curatorial relationship affects and inflects the development of the work of the artist and their relationship with children and staff.

In a later iteration of Changing Play artist Adelita Husni-Bey, for example, worked explicitly with the concept of care with a small group of parents and staff. She arrived at a starting point for her project after spending three days at the Portman Centre, observing and talking with children, parents and staff—something that the Serpentine’s education curators encourage, or require, with each of the artists they commission to work on Changing Play. She says that her idea is to work on ‘structured exercises’ and, from that, to ‘understand what care means to them (parents) for themselves as well as for their children’. The exercises would be to explore aspects of care for self, children and institutions,’ and ‘impositions of policy’ through ‘theatre and games’ drawing from Augusto Boal’s ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’ approaches (Boal, 1979). She is interested in ‘participation’, of engaging in ‘critical ethnography’ and ‘participatory action research techniques.’ She draws a diagram in her notebook, concentric circles with ‘me’ in the middle...
In an initial meeting with three parents and two staff at the Portman Centre, she had gathered a sense of the issues that affect them and, from this discussion, had arrived at a decision that her project would involve an exploration of the theme and practices of care. Out of group discussion and ‘theatre exercises’ using Theatre of Oppressed techniques, Adelita, the parents, and staff have focused down on the story of one parent, Hara, who has a child, Lena, with autism. Hara has experienced great difficulty in finding a school place for Lena and so, although of school age, she is still being cared for at the Portman Centre.

The week after the discussion and theatre exercises, Adelita arrives at the group session with some ideas to develop work with the group. She gets out the work she’s done, a kind of ‘storyboard’ with images and words, and some drawings she’s made, based loosely on Lena and Hara’s story. She leads a discussion, beginning with the question, ‘What does care mean?’ She has drawn a carer and a ‘child character’ as a ‘weird yellow bird’—‘the idea is to represent a mother or care-taker’. It might be, Adelita suggests, that

1. ‘this is how Debbie [a member of Portman staff] cares for…’
2. ‘making potions or food’
3. ‘reading’

She says that the order of the images could be changed, the group can ‘completely change them…’ There are blanks that could be filled with whatever they think, or, ‘this is how Lena cares for Hara by reading her stories’. Debbie looks at the images and is thoughtful and a little puzzled: ‘We didn’t think about how children care for parents in the first session. I couldn’t think how…’ The curator, Jemma, and Sheila, the manager of the Drop-In, people feel that the discussion might flow better with a hook to give some structure and focus to the conversation. Here, an excerpt from field notes from the discussion will give some sense of how the theme of care is worked on.

Jemma has been taping paper to tables with two questions: “How do you care?” and “How are you cared for?” One of the mothers, with a Moroccan background, follows Jemma around and writes out the questions in Arabic. Sue gathered the parents together and they sing some nursery songs (e.g. ‘If you’re happy and you know it’ and ‘Wind the Bobbin Up’). The bread (chapatis this week, too) is ready, laid out on trays, accompanied by cucumber raita and lime pickle.

It is set out on three tables, rearranged after the food preparation to encourage face-to-face discussion. Once the singing is finished and parents are settled around the tables with their children, dipping into the food, Jasleen leads off the discussion: ‘Hi everybody. Under your food are some questions. Maybe we can talk about them in small groups, around our tables?” Jemma, Alex and Jasleen position themselves on each of the three tables of the open square and take notes as the discussion takes off.

These are open questions, and a parent asks, “What do you mean by care?” It’s a good question to start the questions with, as what sense the parents have of the concepts of ‘care.’

In a later project under the Changing Play umbrella, artist Jasleen Kaur explicitly explored the theme of care with a group of mothers and their babies and toddlers who attend the Portman Centre’s ‘Drop in’ sessions. Jasleen’s idea is around food, specifically kinds of bread. She is “interested in bread as something social and political… (in Egypt, bread is known as a’ish, meaning life).” The sessions were structured around “collective cooking, eating together, discussion and listening to each other” (from Jasleen’s project proposal). After leading off with a recipe for making chapatis from her home culture as Sikh brought up in Glasgow, each week thereafter Jasleen asks for and encourages one of the mothers to lead bread-making drawing from their own home cultures. After the first three sessions, and from reflective discussions with Alex and Assistant Education Curator Jemma, the manager of the Drop-In, people feel that the discussion might flow better with a hook to give some structure and focus to the conversation. Here, an excerpt from field notes from the discussion will give some sense of how the theme of care is worked on.

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Below are some of the notes recorded from the discussion on one table:

—Share —prepare a meal
—About human nature
—Culturally specific
—Basic care
—Friends and family
—At work —colleagues
—It someone is upset, asking how they are
—Listening
—People help
—Look after each other
—I help mum
—Sharing experience and ideas
—Ring a friend for help and support
—Share every day with children
—Teach my child to care for others
—When I gave birth, others came to help me —my mother came for one month and cooked me meals every day, and the next month, my friends cooked for me. Friends can help in hard times. It’s how avoided post-natal depression
—It’s part of our culture. My brothers help me. Someone always gives back
—Spending the weekend with my family. They look after me and I can switch off from being a housewife. It shows how they appreciate you.
—Making a special occasion, a celebration...
(Field notes, 21 March 2018)

Finally, an example from ‘Moving Up’, another education programme project in which artist Adam James worked with Year 6 children on their transition to secondary school. It returns more squarely to the (perhaps more conventional) theme of curation, the role of the curator in mediating between artist and a public, or, in the instance of community-based arts work, between artist and participants. At its centre, however, is care and concern for the well-being of children as they move between the institutions of schooling. In his use of a game structure and role play, Adam is working on developing a rite of passage.

The project ran with Gateway Academy, a large primary school in the Church Street neighbourhood. Towards the very end of the school year, reflecting on Moving Up, experienced teacher Claire expressed her appreciation for the way in which Education Curator Alex established and sustained a relationship with the school:

Claire: I’d like just to say thank you to Alex and the Serpentine for helping our children with their transition projects. It’s been really great to work with them—they’ve all been very professional and lovely. I don’t think anyone would have anything other than positive things to say. Alex really understands the pressures we’re under with Year 6. So, she works really hard to combat time pressures with everything we need to get accomplished.

(Interview with Claire Cleary, 17 July 2016)

Claire’s reference to the way in which Alex and her colleagues have been ‘professional and lovely’ gives evidence of the openness and the capacity to form convivial relationships in curatorial relationships and processes. In understanding the institutional pressures that the school, its staff and students are under, Alex demonstrates a carefulness of approach.

Adam James’s project was with Year 6 children in their final term of primary school before they moved on to secondary school after the summer vacation. It was designed to help them approach and adjust to the new situation and the forbidding prospect of going to secondary school. In the project, Adam employed ‘live action role play’ (larp) and devised a game structure that was based on collaborating and communicating with others, initially without words, for groups to create novel improvised creatures and to build new environments together.

In a telephone interview shortly after the project with the children from Gateway Academy, Adam reflects back on the relationship with and role of the education curator in the process:

Adam: I’ve never worked with a curator in this sort of way. When I’ve made things before, I’ve been left much more to my own devices. There’s not been a need before to pin down objectives and outcomes...Alex was great with that...The direction from Alex there was much more focused on debrief and the post-activity and then relating it back to the project’s objectives...There was a lot of freedom there. I think that Alex trusted me to make abstract connections and streamlining of concepts...What I appreciated was how Alex [concentrated on] how we bring it back and get the children to reflect to tease out the value of those things...When I’ve done something similar, I’ve not had so much focus on care and discussion and relation to the real world.

(Telephone interview with Adam James 29 July 2016)

In its purpose and design, Adam’s iteration of Moving Up designed and elaborated a project through role-play action for which there was an underlying ethos to promote care and well-being. Reflecting back on the project in a survey conducted as part of the research and evaluation, the children’s answers to the question of what they learned typify the children’s responses:

—It showed me how to work together and not feel scared.
—It helped me express my feelings for secondary school.
—It made me confident about making new friends.
—This helped me make friends and communicate with others.
—Because you can prepare and stop feeling nervous.*
—Maybe how to respect new people.

*Telephone interview with Adam James 29 July 2016
there emerges a sense of curation in community-based arts projects that exceeds the conventional sense of the term as it is commonly-used and understood in and beyond the art world. It has to be seen as more than a gathering together and the arrangement of a cognate collection of art (visual, musical, literary etc.) for display. As indicated in Hans Ulrich Obrist’s definition above, care as a noun can be used in the sense of providing for the physical, mental and spiritual (here used in a secular sense) welfare and security of others, or it may be applied to signify carefulness in attention to detail and the application of serious intention and consideration. As a verb, allied with the first definition above, to ‘care for’ is actively take other’s needs into consideration, and to ‘care about’ denotes the forms of emotional engagement with people, principles, or material things.

What is indicated above in the evidence of participants—artists, children, young people, parents, staff members—is that the role and practice of curation holds a strong sense of the sociality of cultural collaborations, the formation of social processes and the making of the significant stuff of culture. Evident in the excerpts of discussion, the answers to questions given by children and adults, and the brief description of activities, is how curation involves active listening, empathy and understanding of and care for others. The role of curators and artists as interlocutors in discussion is also crucial in enabling children and young people to voice their concerns and issues, to hear themselves as well as to be heard. Curation in the context of community-based art and education involves activity in caring for and about social, individual and cultural development. It is a sense of curation that chimes with Milan Kundera’s meditation on the definition of ‘compassion’ in his novel The Unbearable Lightness of Being, not as a concept synonymous with a somewhat negative emotion such as pity, but as a positive attribute that ‘signifies the maximal capacity of affective imagination, the art of emotional telepathy’ (Kundera, 1991, 20).

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