

# Creative Pedagogies: School Without Walls and Forest of Imagination

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## Abstract

This paper responds directly to the question, how do we communicate our philosophy of art education? It does this by drawing upon previous research with *House of Imagination*, *School Without Walls* and doctoral research exploring children's learning identity as artists, to illuminate a philosophical approach to art education and its pedagogy that highlights both human and more-than-human dimensions of learning in communities of practice involving artists, researchers and educators working alongside children and young people where spaces of possibility for practice and innovation emerge. The paper focuses particularly on current and creative research in the *Forest of Imagination*, a long-term participatory contemporary arts and architecture event in Bath, UK. *Forest of Imagination* offers an alternative, creative approach to learning, focusing on ecological imagination and nature connection. As a new aesthetic imaginary, the *Forest of Imagination* is a living, breathing art classroom, inspiring curiosity, imagination and a deeper connection with the natural world.

## Keywords

arts, creativity, education, imagination, nature, pedagogy, philosophy

## Introduction

This paper addresses key themes, issues and questions in co-designing experimental sites of pedagogical innovation in arts education. These include the role of the adult in supporting children's learning identity as artists, children and young people as co-researchers, the complexities of learning in and with the more than human world and the concept of eco-creative pedagogies. Through researching experimental sites of pedagogical innovation, the article highlights the complexities of both human and more-than-human connection in learning. This article shares examples

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of how children and young people engage in aesthetic learning and artistic expression, reimagining learning in spaces of possibility and will consider alternative pedagogic practices in articulating a distinctive philosophy of art education. The use of the term philosophy in this context relates to the idea of creating a space of possibility, to communicate a philosophy of art education, and make this visible by enacting a system of attitudes and beliefs that inform both thinking and acting. This practical philosophy illuminates possibilities.

Key influences on my pedagogical approaches both as an artist and as an educator, include the seminal work of Sir Ken Robinson and the contemporary version of *The Arts in Schools Report* (2023). Key findings from my doctoral research (Hay 2023a) are explored, giving particular attention to four strands of research – creative values, creative environments, creative relationships and creative dispositions – and how these might support an individual child's developing identity as an artist. The principles and practices of the charity, *House of Imagination* include two signature projects, *School Without Walls* and *Forest of Imagination* in which artists, educators, children and young people are co-researchers, exploring alternative ways of learning. I discuss the notion of *eventalisation* and *interruptive pedagogies* that have been central to my work and that invite new ways of being and becoming, drawing particularly on thinking from Deleuze & Guattari (1994), Atkinson (2017) and Biesta (2017a, 2017b) but also showing how this has developed as a distinctive pedagogical approach.

The focus of this paper was *Forest of Imagination* as an experimental site of pedagogical innovation and a new aesthetic imaginary, one that highlights the complexities of learning in and with the more than human world. I explore the concept of eco-creative pedagogies that invite a deeper connection with the natural world through learning in and through the arts. In conclusion, I propose a call to action for the transformation of education with a stronger focus on bringing an ecological lens to imagine a more regenerative approach to arts education.

## A philosophical lens

Educators and artists articulate their own philosophy of art education, especially when this relates to the sense of enacting this in the world. The system of beliefs that inform this thinking and acting is a fusion of theoretical and practical activity, affects and possibilities. The relationship between philosophy and pedagogy in art education is key and it is important that this is included in any debate. In view of this, articulating a personal philosophy in the contemporary landscape of art education is even more vital. Experience and professional engagement have nurtured in me an interest in contributing to a community of practice (Wenger 2000) that invites a space of dialogue to explore key values that might give rise to more creative, democratic and alternative modes of practice and pedagogic thought (Hay 2011a). Indeed, the nature of art practice itself invites inquiry, exploration and reflection. As Andrew Brewerton comments 'there is no subject to hide behind' (Brewerton 2021 p.6) and that in making learning, we are making ourselves. Brewerton proposed a learning ethos that places making as practice, as *poiesis*, in direct relation to creative learning and social justice (Brewerton 2021 p.6-7).

One of the challenges of recent developments in arts education is a reductive, prescriptive approach to teaching art that only serves to undermine the integrity of art practice itself. The emphasis on pre-determined learning frameworks reduces

students' agency and self-directed learning. Therefore, the shift to imagining new possibilities in arts education is both exciting and urgent (Charnley *et al.* 2021). The relationship between practice and policy also provides a creative tension, for example if new policies are developed to further the aims of art education, the danger is that these too become the orthodoxy. Opening up spaces for pedagogies of the possible may be preferable (Glaveanu 2022).

Artist-educators' philosophical attitudes and beliefs about art education emerge and change over time. In my case, it was an introduction to the relationship between fine art practice and education at the former Bath Art Academy, inspired by tutors whose pedagogical approaches were so entangled with their own art practice (Noë 2023). John Dewey, Paulo Freire and bell hooks, all inspired a radical liberal and democratic, educational and philosophical approach, committed to pluralistic, egalitarian values and transgressive learning (Hay 2011b). Dewey affirms that democracy and learning can be understood as 'a mode of being in the world' (Dewey 1939 p.2) and supports the argument for more open-ended and creative pedagogies. Dewey also argued that 'Imagination is the chief instrument of the good.' (Dewey 1934 p.348).

Another important figure in art education, Saint Pierre (2004) raised the question, 'What can education learn from the arts about the practice of education?' answering that 'artistically rooted qualitative forms of intelligence' can help with all aspects of education, 'from the design of curricula, to the practice of teaching, to the features of the environment in which students and teachers live' (Eisner 2002 p.1-13). Since this time, I have been particularly influenced by my former PhD supervisor the late Anna Craft, my colleague at Goldsmiths University, Dennis Atkinson, John Baldacchino, philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Andrew Brewerton and the late Sir Ken Robinson.

Atkinson (2017) in particular, contests the limitations of understanding art through established knowledge and practice and invites a focus on 'the force of art challenging us to think' (2017 p.141), and to consider the dynamic process of learning itself. Zhao (2014) also sets out a convincing argument that the essential role of art in education lies in its promotion of students' self-formation and transformation and in its promotion of democracy as genuine plurality.

'In this sense, art as alterity is more important for students who are still becoming, so they can be ever renewed and transformed, and that is the beauty and hope of education.' (Zhao 2014 p.259).

Art practice involves thinking through making, in a variety of modalities. In this sense we are making and being made (Brewerton 2021), our identities are fluid and iterative (Chappell *et al.* 2012). Deleuze and Guattari (1994 p.108) suggest that the practice of philosophy calls for a new earth and a new people that do not yet exist. Jagodzinski (2018) calls for a need to heighten awareness of nature in response to the ecological emergency and the Anthropocene. 'Innovative, integrated, achievable, and inclusive pedagogical intervention into climate change and Anthropocene damage' (Paulsen 2022 p.1). Roussel & Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles (2023) discuss a creative and future facing pedagogy that explores the relationship with our environment, with nature as a teacher, especially in the face of the ecological emergency, and with post human theories in conversation with children's art making.

In considering the future of art education and alternative pedagogic practices this invitation to think about alternative futures has informed my own professional practice, both as an artist and as an educator. An exploration of the influences that have brought me to this place in time inform how my current and particular approach is emerging and distinctive. I take a humanist approach based on self-determination and freedom, arguing for a new, regenerative approach to arts education, nourished by the insights of both child-centred and ecological perspectives.

## Arts in schools

One of the seminal texts that influenced my own understanding of the philosophy of art education was *The Arts in Schools Report* (Robinson 1982) which challenged the focus on standards and performance, addressing conflicting views of both progressive and traditional approaches to teaching and learning. In fact, I was fortunate to work with Sir Ken Robinson as part of the *All our Futures* report (Robinson 1999). This report aimed to highlight the importance of creativity and the arts in education. It emphasised the need for a holistic approach to education that values creativity alongside academic achievements. This became a key text for educators in the UK and gave rise to Creative Partnerships in 2002, aligning with Every Child Matters in 2003, but it was not adopted by the government to inform policy. In Robinson's TED (Technology, Entertainment and Design) talk, *Do Schools Kill Creativity?* he passionately argues for the need to nurture creativity in education and criticised traditional education systems for stifling it, thereby shaping international discussions around education, creativity and curriculum reform.

In 2022-3 *The Arts in Schools Report* was revisited by Sally Bacon and Pauline Hambling, again supported by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, and exploring these issues through the lens of the arts. The 2023 report highlighted the importance of young people's entitlement to a rich arts curriculum that responds to the needs and interests of students in the *here and now* (Biesta 2017b), emphasising not only skills for work but importantly, skills for life. The report also stresses the positive role of the arts in nurturing social and emotional well-being and communication skills.

'Arts activities can involve aesthetic engagement, imagination stimulation, sensory activation, cognitive stimulation, social interaction, physical activity or engagement with health or well-being.' (Fancourt & Finn 2019 p.1)

However, this invites caution that the arts are not instrumentalised to only exist in-service of other areas of the curriculum. Even some of the key concepts explored in Robinson's 'All Our Futures' have become commonplace in the narrative which instrumentalised art education and remain to be challenged and explored. In particular, I would argue that each art form has its own integrity and there is an intrinsic value in the arts in relation to personal, social and cultural expression (UNESCO 2021). Aesthetic education fosters a deeper understanding of ways of being in the world, encouraging individuals to critically reflect on their experiences. The human right to arts and culture is central to this argument (Rogoff 2003; Alexander 2010). With this in mind, interdisciplinarity and pedagogical renewal then invite innovative and transformative approaches that go beyond traditional educational paradigms. This includes rethinking approaches to teaching and

learning to better reflect and explore contemporary issues (Adams & Owens 2016).

## Children's learning identity as artists

'Children are Artists' (Hay 2023a) explored my own professional practice as an artist educator, drawing on collaborative research with  $5 \times 5 \times 5 = \text{creativity}$  (now called *House of Imagination*) giving particular attention to four strands of research—creative values (ethos and priorities of adults), creative environments (emotional climate, time, space and resources), creative relationships (between adults and children) and creative dispositions (behaviours, skills and capacities)—and how these might support an individual child's developing identity as an artist.

The methodological approach included creative research in action, setting up an experimental site for pedagogical research and innovation in a primary school. Data were gathered over a 3-year period that focused on the role of the adult alongside children, and particularly their pedagogical approaches. Methods included observations, field notes, artwork, interviews and reflective journals. In thinking through the emerging theory, I used diffractive analysis (Lenz Taguchi 2012; Barad 2014) as a thinking tool, taking apart the data in a multi-faceted way, mapping connections and in the process, unearthing values and principles. Moving from a coding-based approach to a diffractive approach enabled meaning to emerge through a different assemblage, with a focus on affect and entanglement (Hickey-Moody 2013). Significant 'glow moments' (MacLure 2010) emerged in the process of data analysis. These glow moments gave insight into my developing understanding of children's learning identity as artists and the role of the adult in this process.

This research has evidenced the key characteristics of the role of adults in this process. These include the adult as a companion in the child's learning, valuing self-directed enquiry related to the notion of heutagogy (rather than adults' prescriptions) and with an emphasis on the child's developing ideas and self-concept as an artist, exploring their imagination and generating ideas in a hundred languages (Edwards *et al.* 1998). This experimental pedagogy focuses on artistic learning and identity, where children are actively encouraged to follow their fascinations in a landscape of possibility and encounter. Findings from the study have led to a distillation of pedagogical characteristics that support a child's learning identity as an artist and include recommendations for a repertoire of creative pedagogies. The study has generated new insights into a pedagogical approach that has wider relevance and educational significance to the future of art education.

## An aside: How do adults support children's developing identity as artists?

*Becoming and being an artist*

*Quality of relationships and dialogue*

*Art and affect*

*Exploration and choice*

*Self-directed enquiry*

*Collaboration and creative provocations*

*Deep documentation*  
*Space, time and attention*  
*Structure and freedom*  
*Aesthetic experience*  
*Inviting a 'hundred languages' of thinking and expression*  
*Thinking through making*  
*The aesthetic third*  
*Working with contemporary artists*  
*A way of thinking*  
*The value of uncertainty*  
*Children working as artists*  
 (Hay 2023a)

This work is placed in the current context of arts education in the UK and provides new concepts, approaches, and methods in relation to primary arts education. It takes forward the literature in this field and proposes a radical change to the way art is taught in schools. The findings demonstrate the need to rethink our responsibilities within education in relation to children's entitlement to a progressive arts education that values their developing identities as artists. This experimental pedagogical research brings imagination, hope, ideas and new learning—as a continually moving practical and theoretical assemblage. Developing an art pedagogy through the Deleuzian concepts of immanence, assemblage and becoming presents an opportunity for more innovative and ethical action in and out of the classroom, as everyday activism—to disrupt the current orthodoxies in education creatively and to open up new lines of flight (Deleuze & Guattari 1994).

An important part of the thesis was the proposal of a new manifesto for arts education:

## A manifesto for arts education

1. At the core of children's own self-concept of becoming and being an artist is the child's agency, interest, motivation and volition.
2. Giving the child agency shifts control from adults to children, allowing the time and the space to make art at their own pace, in their own way and following their own fascinations and interests.
3. Children find their own voice, by transforming materials to say what they want to say, to say what they mean, to make meaning.
4. Visual art experiences engage children in authentic learning, with the opportunity to play, explore, experiment and use their imaginations to express and communicate their ideas.
5. The creative environment is a key factor in ensuring children are offered a potentiating and enabling space to make art alongside others, with materials that offer affordance to realise ideas in different ways.
6. Working with artists as role models allows children to see themselves as artists, engaging with ideas and concepts in a cultural and artistic context.
7. Artists and creative enablers can be 'lenders of tools and processes', introducing children to materials and scaffolding skills and techniques as appropriate.
8. Artwork is most meaningful to children if they are allowed to generate and explore their own line of enquiry.

9. Children can explore diverse visual and creative enquiries (individually and together) alongside adults that care, who give quality attention and engaged in genuine dialogue with children about their ideas.
10. Art has the power to be transformational in our lives, we all have the potential to be an artist.

Recent case studies demonstrate how these principles permeate our collaborative research.

## House of Imagination

*House of Imagination* is an arts-based research charity that I co-founded in 2000 (formerly 5 × 5 × 5), that works alongside children and young people, artists and educators. Signature projects include *School Without Walls* and *Forest of Imagination* both with a focus on creative activism and experimental sites of pedagogical innovation, in partnership with Bath Spa University UK (Benn *et al.* 2020; Hay & Tilley 2022c). *House of Imagination* is a concept, a studio environment for children and young people to collaborate with artists and creative professionals, it is a home for improvisation, creativity and innovation and a place to make these visible through research. *House of Imagination's* research is underpinned by a clear set of principles and invites co-enquiry through creative action research. *House of Imagination* works with children and young people, artists and educators to co-create 'learning everywhere', both in school and in the city as a campus for learning. Central to this vision is children's perception of their own identity as artists and how the arts can be transformational in their lives (Hay & París 2020). *House of Imagination's* creative methodology—everyone an artist—drives the ambition for depth in artistic quality. These spaces of creative activism and creative pedagogy push the boundaries of art and education, alongside children and young people. These creative approaches give rise to a repertoire of creative pedagogical characteristics that optimise freedom, agency, choice and imagination and reimagine a new approach to arts education.

*School Without Walls* and *Forest of Imagination* are key signature projects and offer an alternative, creative approach to learning and researching experimental sites for pedagogical innovation.

These innovative education projects reimagine the culture of learning differently, where reflection, the attention and a democratic approach to learning are based on respectful relationships in a community of learning. This approach of creative pedagogy (Craft *et al.* 2013) identifies some key aspects of creative learning including co-enquiry and co-construction, attention to creative dispositions, learner agency, the quality and rigour of learning, open-ended activities and multi-modal learning.

## School without walls

*School Without Walls* (Hay 2021a) offers a creative enquiry-based approach to learning, reconceptualising the whole curriculum with the city as a campus for learning; it places the arts at the heart of learning in *100 languages* (Malaguzzi 1996), inviting children to make meaning through all their senses. Creativity,



real life contexts, learner agency, reflection and relationships are central to this process. Children's engagement in creative enquiry and critical reflection enables them to express their ideas in many different media, drawing on the integrity of each arts discipline, with the curiosity and questioning habits of mind of an artist (Figure 1).

Multi-professional teams work in partnership to support children and young people in environments of enquiry, challenging orthodoxies and developing new ways of thinking. Children and young people working as artists invites opportunities for exploration, with emphasis on using innovative approaches that stimulate the imagination and encourage independent thought. This approach constitutes an integrated creative and reflective pedagogy with research at the heart of the process, building a new culture of schooling that places emphasis on agency and dynamic relationships in learning (Hay 2021a, 2021b). Careful observation, documentation and analysis of children's learning and responding to their interests and fascinations has demonstrated increased motivation and engagement. We have witnessed the extraordinary creativity and imagination of both children and adults. Together we have designed a creative and democratic approach to learning through co-enquiry that is underpinned by a clear set of values and principles. The role of the adult team has been crucial in sharing creative expertise and thinking between artists, educators and mentors, developing a creative and reflective pedagogy that is transforming schools, cultural centres and artists (Benn *et al.* 2020).

### Key elements of School Without Walls (Hay & Paris 2020)

1. Children and young people as creative and active citizens.
2. Creative and empowering environments.
3. Residency in a cultural setting.



**FIGURE 1**  
School Without Walls: 100 Languages of Learning (Photo: the Egg Theatre)



4. Engagement in co-enquiry.
5. Adults as companions in learning.
6. Documentation of emerging themes.
7. Access to live and real art.
8. Working alongside creative role models.
9. Multi-sensory learning in 100 languages of expression.
10. Time, space and attention to creative processes.
11. Personal growth and independence.
12. Democratic, creative and reflective pedagogy.

*School Without Walls* was a case study for UNESCO's *Reimagining Our Futures Together* (2021) that emphasises the role of arts education in a complex world framed by uncertainty, and to imagine and nurture different ways of being and becoming. Situating a school inside an arts and cultural organisation offers daily artistic and cultural exchanges to enrich the learning experiences for all children and adults involved. This integration of arts and culture inside an educational environment, combining creative and academic learning by embedding an arts organisation within a school and vice versa. Agency and relationships are vital to this process of co-enquiry (Hay 2021b) and aligns with UNESCO's reimagining of education by making visible a creative methodology for schools and settings. These experimental sites of encounter and pedagogical innovation then infuse a paradigm shift. 'Culture and arts education should be holistic, transformative, and impactful' (UNESCO 2024).

### 1. **Alternative pedagogies**

2. *School Without Walls* is an opportunity to co-create an experimental event to explore an alternative pedagogy. The concept of 'event' (Deleuze 2004; Badiou 2005) as a potential immanent within a confluence of forces invites us to rethink education. The event is not a disruption of a continuous state; instead, it renders every moment of the state a transformation (Deleuze, 2004). These events are changes generated in the moment of interaction, produced as wholly immanent and creative productions and as a pure effect; an event is neither a beginning nor an endpoint but is always 'in the middle' and 'becoming' (ibid), inviting a series of experiments to enable learners to learn, think and act as 'free, wild, untamed differences' (Deleuze, 2004, p. 61). This pedagogy of experimentation is participatory and creative through open-ended exploration. Deleuze conceptualises learning as a complex and open sense-making process that involves an encounter with the world that forces us to think (Deleuze 2004).

The notion of 'eventalisation' and 'interruptive pedagogies' (Atkinson 2017; Biesta 2017b) has been central to my work over many years that invite new ways of being and becoming. Extending this concept, I am particularly interested in exploring how the art practices of children and young people invite sense-making and meaning-making through which they construct their learning identities as artists (Hay 2023a, 2023b). A strong theme in Atkinson's work is how to retrieve art education as a form of *real* learning, as an event that can profoundly affect people's lives by moving them beyond normative thinking and action (Atkinson 2018). He describes these 'pedagogies against the state' as 'anti-pedagogy', approaches that invites risk-taking, creative action and transformative practice. For example, he gives a beautiful description of a child in the act of painting as a temporal

unfolding (2011). Atkinson more recently has proposed a *pedagogy of taking care* (2022) that embraces both becoming-making, that which concerns the potentials aptitudes interests and capabilities of each child or student to advance individual and collective pursuits and that which evolves and expands each teacher's understanding of pedagogical practice. Taking this further as a world view has informed my own philosophical approach to co-designing live, creative sites of learning with students, artists and educators working together.

In addition, Biesta argues for *being in the world* as a place of dialogue, in an educational space that is not the outcome of a developmental trajectory, but a way of existing, of being and paying attention to the *quality* of what and who is being expressed, a quality that has to do with how children and can exist *well*, individually and collectively, *in* the world and *with* the world (Biesta (2017a, 2017b)). It is working through the experience of art as a dialogue, as an expression of being human in the world, as an encounter between desires and materiality, that allows children to express their voice, make their own sense, be creative, generate subjective meaning and articulate their own unique identity. This invitation to rethink and reimagine school art is a process that can only happen in dialogue with learners, as a continuum of relations and transformations (Biesta (2017a, 2017b)). The focus on opening up a space for dialogue is central to our collaborative and co-created research.

## Forest of imagination

This trans-contextual mutuality in learning (Bateson 2023) and co-creation is at the heart of our work in *Forest of Imagination* highlighting pedagogical practices that facilitate and support enquiry in arts practice and ecological imagination through the three ecologies of mind, society and environment (Guattari 2008). The invitation for learning is entangled with the concepts of inspiration and imagination (Hay and Amondson 2024).

*Forest of Imagination* is a long-term participatory contemporary arts and architecture event in Bath, UK that reimagines familiar spaces, inspiring creativity and heightening awareness of nature in response to the ecological emergency. *Forest of Imagination* creates a space of possibility, to communicate a particular philosophy of art education that makes creative learning visible by enacting a system of attitudes and beliefs that inform both thinking and acting. *Forest of Imagination* is an experimental site of pedagogical innovation, a new aesthetic imaginary, that highlights the complexities of learning in and with the natural world. The project engages children and young people in aesthetic learning and artistic expression, reimagining learning in *spaces of possibility* (Hay 2022a, 2022b). Together we are developing a community of practice with artists, researchers and educators working alongside children and young people. These spaces of possibility invite creative and reflective practice that place the arts, creativity, imagination, nature and well-being at the heart of a future, innovative pedagogy.

Reinventing urban spaces to inspire spontaneous play, unleash imagination and enhance our engagement with nature invites a public pedagogy—everyone is invited to have a conversation about nature and imagination in our lives. Creative art installations and performances contribute to the cultural richness of the urban environment through creative place-making. Playful design and opportunities for experiential learning encourage interaction and engagement, contributing to a sense

of belonging, well-being and community. Our collaborative and interdisciplinary practice research methodologies explore ideas through a multi-modal approach, and a combination of visual art, photography, film and narrative. In reimagining learning we place the learner, nature and imagination all at the centre. This creates an opportunity for both children and adults to think differently about the way we see nature, to imagine new possibilities and hopeful futures (Hay and Amondson 2024; Figure 2).

Artist and film-maker Andrew Amondson posed a question to the children:

‘Think of a tree as an idea and imagine if the tree was talking. Imagine if you plant a tree that can save the world. Imagine if you could plant an idea that can save the world, plant it in the ground so that everyone can experience it. Plant an idea, maybe an amazing idea that could save the world’.



**FIGURE 2**  
Forest of Imagination 2021 (Photo Charlotte Piddington)

Children explained their thoughts:

'You have a choice. You have a choice to use your time, your abilities to build a better space'.

'To understand, if you have an idea, maybe it's a seed that you plant, then that idea grows and it grows, like a tree and it can change the world'.

'I kind of think like when you plant a tree what does that tree symbolise? Does it symbolise a forest, or does it symbolise just this lone tree. And I thought about what if it was me ... and you could show, just that you can change the world, you don't need a whole country, you don't need a whole continent ... you can change the world'.

*Forest of Imagination 2022 (Photo Andrew Amondson)*  
*Every classroom should be a work of Art*  
*(Joseph Beuys in Biesta 2017a)*

On entering the Living Tree Mirror Maze there was astonishment: 'Wow, I can't believe this'. There were looks of amazement and gazing around the whole space. Reflecting on their experience of it they described how it made them feel: *amazed, calm, enchanted, magic, welcoming, warm, sleepy, summer, home, ecstatic, happy, energetic, frightened, free, damp, beautiful, good, loving, lovely, excited, thankful*. There was smiling and laughter. Living Tree Mirror Maze Case Study (Elders & Hay 2022)

The philosophical approach demonstrates how the field of art and design education research illuminates the power of imagination and nature in learning as a form of ecological inquiry. I propose that inviting a focus on ecological imagination offers a pedagogical approach that prioritises relationships and connections to the natural world, bringing an ecological lens to imagine a more regenerative approach to arts education (Figure 3).

## Eco-creative pedagogies

How can art make a difference in a contemporary world dominated by complex environmental challenges? *Forest of Imagination* shines a light on the importance of global forests and the capacity of forests to inspire creativity in everyone. As children and young people develop knowledge and understanding about climate change, they can discover how to take individual responsibility in protecting the environment through active personal engagement. Sustainability, arts, and environmental issues prioritise the need for facilitated and artistic environments to install a shift in values for a more a shared narrative, committed to every child having the right to a high-quality arts education, no matter what their background or circumstance.

Care, creativity, curiosity and imaginative responses to the climate emergency are at the heart of the *Forest of Imagination*, embedding a pedagogical approach where learning is negotiated and invited, nurturing a creative environment where all ideas are welcome. An entanglement of empathy and inquiry creates this *space*



**FIGURE 3**  
PS it is Forest of Imagination 2022.

of possibility (Hay 2021a, 2021b, Noë 2023). Awe and wonder ignite children's imagination and invite them to explore, question and engage with the world around them. Curiosity and inquiry are vital dispositions in relation to intrinsic motivation and critical thinking, both central to art practice, inviting students to make connections and evaluate different perspectives. Nurturing wonder and creativity in art education will develop these habits of mind and feed their artistic and aesthetic sensibilities. Artists and art educators play a crucial role in fostering wonder in the classroom by creating an environment that encourages exploration and inquiry (Glaveanu 2016).

Maxine Greene (1995) was a strong advocate for aesthetic education, asserting that the arts have the power to transform and deepen human experience and the importance of cultivating an aesthetic sensibility in learners. Greene explored the transformative potential of imagination and aesthetic experiences as integral to personal and social development, advocating for a more holistic, meaningful and inclusive approach to education. For Greene, the arts and aesthetic-embodied engagement were catalysts for awakened 'possibilities of existing, of being human, of relating to others, of being other' (Greene, 1995 p.214). Karen Barad's ethico-onto-epistemology suggests a worldview where ethics, being and knowing are intertwined (Barad 2007) linked directly to the ethico-aesthetics of affect and a sensational pedagogy (Springgay 2011).

Reflecting on the philosophy of art education, John Baldacchino (2012) also emphasises the importance of aesthetic experience and arts-based inquiry in the learning process, exploring how artistic methods can be integrated into educational research practices and social action. Haraway (2016) invites us to *stay with the trouble*, to explore new potentialities, new living entanglements of *what is* and *what might be*. In relation to ecological imagination, understanding ecologically relates to Guattari's (2008) three ecologies, the social, the environmental and the conceptual, as they enmesh in every event. Imagining ecologically is a way of paying attention to and making sense of the world that is attuned to relationships, connections and context (Judson 2008).

The educational philosophy underpinning *Forest of Imagination* prioritises children and young people at the centre of the learning experience and so developing



a sense of ownership and agency. Encouraging open-mindedness, empathy and curiosity for diverse perspectives promotes a more inclusive and understanding learning environment. We invite students to be inquisitive, and to value uncertainty and questioning as a natural part of the learning process. This creative learning environment is a departure from more traditional or rigid educational structures. We have the opportunity to conceptualise how we nurture children's natural drive to learn especially through their imagination, the arts and in the natural environment (Hay 2023a, 2023b). Together we attempt to articulate a perspective on the intersection of contemporary art practice, aesthetics and research. Engaging students directly with contemporary arts practice is vital in exploring the diversity of artistic expression and cultural production and as a dynamic and participatory approach to contemporary art and design. We invite an approach to aesthetics that is formative and radically democratic (Baldacchino 2012). The term radically democratic here implies a commitment to inclusivity and openness, valuing research as a generative and creative activity. The role of the artist educator is one that actively promotes democratic principles and engages with learning as a constantly changing and dynamic process (Chappell *et al.* 2012).

Importantly, Manning & Massumi (2014) talk about *thinking-doing research-creation*. Research-creation is study, *a practice that thinks*, and philosophical theory is itself a practice (Deleuze 1989 p280). Manning calls to let classrooms be invitations for study, not knowledge consumption and in the spirit of Deleuze, *to start in the middle* and so to explore a pedagogical process that starts in the middle, as a collective learning inquiry (Manning 2015). Research-creation involves experimenting and the *not-yet* at the heart of learning in a collaborative learning environment dedicated to participatory experimentation where concept-making meets embodied creative practice (Manning 2020). This for me describes a future learning environment that values everyone's contributions in a democratic and emancipatory space. As a society we need to think more deeply about climate education and how we can respond with hopeful and imaginative solutions to the ecological emergency. My thinking is aligned with Paulsen (2022) who call for a new way of educating, new philosophies of education and pedagogical imaginations, thoughts and practices, a reimagining of education that serves to deepen our understanding of the capacities and values of life.

## Conclusions

The philosophical approach explored in this article demonstrates how the field of art and design education research illuminates the power of imagination and nature in learning as a form of ecological inquiry. Inviting a focus on ecological imagination offers a pedagogical approach that prioritises relationships and connections to the natural world, bringing an ecological lens to imagine a more regenerative approach to arts education. As a new aesthetic imaginary, *Forest of Imagination* is a living, breathing art classroom, inspiring curiosity and a deeper connection with the natural world. This approach offers an alternative and creative method of learning, with a focus on ecological imagination and nature connection. Values around compassion and identity, imagination and freedom invite a space for dialogue and possibility. All learning is negotiated and invited; all ideas are welcome. The emphasis is on empowering young people to find and follow their fascinations, providing them with agency in their relationships and the freedom to engage in collaborative inquiry.

Gert Biesta recently gave a paper in Brussels 'Why the Arts Matter' (2023)

*THE ARTS ARE NOT A LUXURY they go to the heart of the matter they are essential for our existence as human being for our ongoing attempts at trying to be at home in the world which is a lifelong challenge*



*which is perhaps even more urgent in our times*

*it is for this reason, and only for this reason that every child and young person should have the opportunity to encounter the arts*

**THIS IS THE RIGHT TO ARTS EDUCATION**

*which comes with the duty for every civilised society to make this possible.*

We need an urgent call to action, to bring learning in and through the arts to the heart of learning in the face of the existential crises. Creative and artistic activism invites a dynamic practice of creating and co-creating art that shines a light on the very act of making, thinking and feeling, expressing our ideas in many different modalities to addresses political or social issues and the creative power of the arts to brings about social change. We have been exploring participatory and relational ways of being in the world, as ecological and aesthetic beings alongside the more-than-human. Through our research, we have co-created transdisciplinary spaces of possibility and meaning-making. The arts invite different forms of being and knowing and offer new possibilities for action to find ways to address the ecological and social issues of our time, as an engagement with the world that is ecological in both thought and practice. This creative pedagogical activism simultaneously invites the emergence of more imaginative and transformative pedagogies to expand the horizons of possibility and alternative educational futures.

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