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**The quality and equality of personal and professional development in teacher-artist partnerships**

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# The **quality** and **equality** of personal and professional development in teacher-artist partnerships

Vera McGrath



## Abstract

Partnership implies equality. However, while earlier iterations of Teacher-Artist Partnership (TAP) failed to acknowledge teacher professionalism in their structure and implementation, more recent TAP evaluations tend to focus exclusively on teacher professional development. There is little in the way of documented evidence of artists' development in TAP, let alone efforts to describe it. Case studies of two Irish I-TAP-PD residencies are presented below to illuminate the nature of the learning both professionals experienced through the I-TAP-PD process. The premise is to generate dialogue about the quality and equality of learning in TAP for both artists and teachers and prompt further research into this important area of enquiry. The case studies indicate that ongoing dialogue and practice between partners of equal status are key in generating real insight into children's learning through the arts. And such insights have much to contribute to evolving TAP practices for the betterment of our arts-in-education provision for children in our schools.

**Keywords:** *TAP, equal partnership, case study, personal development, professional development*

## Introduction

Teacher-Artist Partnership (TAP) was introduced to support the arts in education. Arts advocates had raised legitimate queries about the quality of arts provision in schools (Kind et al., 2007). The partnership proposal came about to address these concerns and to create opportunities for students to access and engage in "authentic" arts practices. The expectation that TA partnerships in an educational setting would benefit students was assumed, as many generalist teachers lack confidence in teaching the arts (Fahy & Kenny, 2023; Hanley, 2003; Kenny & Morrissey, 2016; Kind et al., 2007; Morrissey & Kenny, 2021). However, another value proposition is that such ventures would concomitantly serve as professional development for teachers, where teachers could advance their arts skills through observing and assisting artists. This rationale, however, has been heavily criticised in academic literature and not without reason. It presents the artists as "experts" and the teachers as "novices" and while this may be true in specific arts disciplines, it is far from true in professional terms (Hanley, 2003). In this context, there is a real danger that the teacher will perceive himself/herself and be perceived by others, particularly stakeholders, as subordinate to the artist. This can translate to a very unequal partnership dynamic with teachers' professional knowledge being sidelined and their role reduced to that of "helpers, guards or mediators for the artists" (Christophersen, 2013).

## From TAP Ireland to I-TAP-PD

TAP Ireland was established in 2014 with the specific aim of ensuring that an equal partnership was the focal point of the venture. Funded by the two government departments, Education and Arts & Culture, it was critical that the practices and professional expertise of practitioners from both domains were recognised and harnessed in developing the programme. Teachers needed to witness, understand and "buy-into" the real value of arts-led activities and methodologies in education, while artists needed to understand school culture, curriculum and the needs of students for optimal engagement. TAP Ireland has developed its own positively evaluated TAP programme, training to date in excess of 3,500 practitioners nationwide. Ongoing development and research are a critical factor in the programme's relevance and longevity. Our involvement in the Erasmus+ funded I-TAP-PD<sup>1</sup> venture has proven to be transformative. It greatly expanded our perspective and introduced us to practitioners with expertise, experiences and practices we would not otherwise have encountered. Moreover, through our engagement in I-TAP-PD, we have uncovered some



interesting insights into the nature of the learning both teachers and artists undergo when engaging in the residencies-in-schools, the learning through praxis dimension of the I-TAP-PD programme.

## Describing I-TAP-PD residencies in Ireland: Two cases

Two of four I-TAP-PD residencies that took place in Irish primary schools in 2022 are discussed in this article with a view to describing the quality of the learning participants underwent, while illustrating how both artists and teachers gained professionally and personally from the partnered residency. The residencies were conducted by artist-teacher pairs who had worked together previously. All had between 5-25 years' experience in their respective professions. Both TA pairs planned residencies that would meet the children's needs while complementing the curriculum.

In the first residency (Residency 1),<sup>2</sup> the TA pair planned their programme around a whole-school project, focusing on the school's local environment. Their overarching aims were manifold: to find the "space" within curriculum to explore a local bogland through the arts, to utilise arts practices that were linked socially and historically with the area, to help the children develop a clear sense of themselves as learners by introducing them to the creative habits of mind and to adapt the methodologies of teaching the craft form to accommodate children with different



needs and levels of dexterity so that the residency was fully inclusive. The 12-year-old students were in the process of learning about the social, environmental, historical and topographical nature of their local bog. They had already explored traditional bog songs and choreographed a dance based on bog labour, so approaching the project through the visual arts was well-considered. Interestingly, while the artist had a multi-disciplinary visual-arts practice, it was the teacher who was the skilled lacemaker. In an unusual reversal of roles, the artist spent time with the teacher learning lacemaking techniques before the residency commenced. This blurred the boundaries between artist's and teacher's identities and the pair presented the project and skills to the children on very equal terms from the outset.

The second residency (Residency 2) was conducted in a large urban school with a class of 8-year-olds. The TA pair planned the residency around a specific curricular theme: the lives of bees and their role in the eco-system. The partners arranged for a local apiologist to visit and speak with the children to complement their residency. Both partners were keen to engage the children as partners in the residency and introduced the class to reflective journaling, so the children could record their responses to each session. So, while the residency themes were founded in curriculum and the approaches and skills were appropriately chosen, the residency's trajectory and pace of delivery were to be determined by the children. This approach allowed for plans to change on foot of students' feedback, so the children effectively became the third "partner" in the residency, guiding the artist and teacher through its delivery. Both partners were determined to learn about and

from the children as much as teach them. In this manner, they established themselves as equal partners in this residency, as engaging the children in planning and delivery to this extent was a new venture for both.

### Evaluation of the residencies

The two residencies were evaluated using a variety of tools commonly used in Action Research. These were applied at three stages of the residencies: individual online pre-residency questionnaires, individual semi-guided reflective diaries and two semi-structured post-residency group interviews for artists and teachers, respectively. Data was categorised into five overarching themes: Co-operation, Personal Development, Professional Development, Challenges and Children's Responses. This approach resulted in an extensive data yield which, when analysed, led to interesting insights into the extent and the nature of the learning and development participants undergo through engaging in partnered residencies.

It is learning and development that occurred as a result of "praxis", in the fullest Freirean sense of the word, that is explored in this commentary on good practice. A partnered residency, in which teachers and artists, alongside children, negotiate an arts-based programme within curricular parameters, produces the sort of knowledge that is only gained "through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (Freire, 1970). This is why the learning uncovered is critical. The data not only illuminates the nature and depth of the learning acquired, but analysis indicates that artists learn and develop at an equal pace to teachers and

in ways that are illuminating for their practices. This is an important insight, as it:

- Supports more recent assertions that artists do learn through TAP engagement. Most research on TAP focuses on teacher learning. Some researchers, Kenny and Morrissey (2016, 2021) and Morrissey and Kenny (2021) acknowledge artist learning and Kind et al. (2007) lightly document examples. But beyond this, it is difficult to find explicit data on artists learning.
- Puts the artist and teacher on equal footing in terms of partnership and as beneficiaries in terms of Professional Development.
- Documents evidence of the nature of artists' development alongside that of teachers, which will support and inform developments in TAP practices.

To illustrate this, examples of the expanse and depth of the concurrent learnings of both artists and teachers are presented and discussed below under the three relevant themes: Co-operation, Personal Development and Professional Development.

**Co-operation** refers to the nature of the engagement and the level of co-operation between the artist and teacher in the preparation for and delivery of the residency. It denotes the quality of their partnership. The data yield indicates that both partnerships were well founded and that the teachers and artists were equally committed to the partnership.

In Residency 1, the artist acknowledges the “[b]enefits of getting to know the teacher personally” in creating a relationship that was sufficiently robust to prompt the teacher to invite the artist to her home to learn new textile skills in preparation for residency. In such an arrangement, both teacher and artist demonstrated confidence in their partnership as well as respect for each other’s professionalism in agreeing to skill share to this degree. Trust is very important in TA partnerships and the artist explains that the enormous trust she felt in working with her teacher partner was a result of their having a history of working in partnership together. As she explains:

I noticed ... how different it is to work with [teacher's name] than it is to be working with someone new. I have a relaxed sense with [teacher's name], a sense that if I have forgotten something important that all will be well. I feel supported, emotionally, physically, and practically by [teacher's name]. (A1RJ)

Her partner teacher felt equally comfortable in the partnership. She describes in her journal how they worked co-operatively together developing strategies to introduce the skills to the children in an appropriate manner. This practice continued throughout the residency, with the pair collaborating frequently and problem-shooting together if the

children encountered difficulties. The teacher notes that she and the artist regularly “had a lot of discussion about the process and what we needed to do to move to the next stage”. The teacher recalls how they worked co-operatively together and relied on each other as the residency progressed: “We were very much feeling our way together. We were assessing what was working well for the children and at the same time trying to assess what children were finding difficult” (T1RJ).

Similarly, the partners in Residency 2 acknowledged that working together previously gave them confidence in their partnership. This level of confidence allowed the pair to take risks. They agreed to push the boundaries of their joint practice by involving the children in the residency’s trajectory, eliciting their feedback after each session and planning the next session in accordance with the children’s learning, needs and responses.

This was an interesting partnership approach, as the partners were effectively engaging the children in their partnership. It worked because both partners were equally committed to this considered approach. It demanded high levels of trust and flexibility from both practitioners alongside a willingness to take equal responsibility for difficulties that might arise. The partners feedback indicates that they admirably rose to these challenges.

I found that I needed to display HUGE flexibility. We had our skeletal plan done, but we also had to “read the room” and check in with the kids because maybe we had prepared too much. It was [about] learning to let things go as well as keeping our eyes on the goal ... within the framework and displaying a lot of flexibility around this. (A2GI)

Indeed, at one point, this ambitious residency ran into trouble. Mid-residency, the children indicated that they were unhappy and frustrated because a session was “too rushed”. The partners took equal responsibility for this session’s failure. Consulting with the children, they decided to revisit one particular art skill. Even though this meant “creating a lot of mess”, the children really enjoyed the revised session and “produced outstanding work, beyond comparison”. Trust was identified by both partners as a key factor in allowing them to operate on such a highly co-operative level. The quote from the teacher partner below summarises the nature of the partnership they developed.

And to have the openness [within the partnership] to do that level of critical reflection and take on board the feedback from the children ... the partnered residency is very special in that way. [T]rust is really, really important, so that we’re not judging each other ... it’s very openly critical ... constructively critical... of how we’re doing. (T2GI)



**Personal Development**, which references insights that the participants experienced about themselves as individuals, also emerged in the mid- and post- residency data. Though there is often much overlap between personal and professional development in work-based practices, the examples offered below are of a personal nature. What personal learning touches upon are the assumptions, biases and perceptions of ourselves and others we hold as a result of earlier experiences. Through praxis, these presumptions and biases are challenged for both professionals.

In Residency 1, the artist admits that for many years, she shied away teachers. She expresses it thus: "Prior to I-TAP[-PD], I would have had a low-lying fear of teachers, fear of being in their company, fear of them finding out I can't spell, hiding all of those aspects of myself" (A1RD). She then goes on to explain how her relationship with her partner teacher has supported her so much that she now approaches residencies anticipating "joy" and "fun" and "confidence" in the many ways she can contribute to an educational programme and to children's learning.

Equally, her teacher partner admitted to holding a very specific self-perception. She admitted that:

I always thought I liked working on my own and I do like working on my own in the classroom, but when I met (artist's name) and the relationship developed ... now I just love having that extra

voice and that expertise ... my collaborative skills have been enhanced. (T1GI)

Even since completing the I-TAP-PD residency with her long-term artist partner, she has since applied for a new residency with an artist she has not worked with before, as she is so convinced of the merits of the partnered practice.

In Residency 2, the artist made considerable progress in her ability to identify and express her needs as an artist in the classroom, an issue that she had struggled with in residencies with other teachers. She explains that for the first time, her request was heard, understood and responded to appropriately:

I was able to get my point across on how I need the teacher to explain what they are doing with the children in their classroom in terms of curriculum. I felt like I succeeded this time ... because I always keep trying to tell teachers how to help and support me, but this time it actually happened! (A2GI)

Her partner teacher credits the artist with helping her overcome her fear of "trying something new" and taking risks. The artist's presence gave her the confidence to face her fears, particularly around technology and facilitating arts practices remotely: "Risk taking: [Artist's name] brought that to my awareness; not being afraid to try something, especially something that we're not confident in. We did a session over Zoom. It was a huge challenge. I was terrified" (T2GI).

**Professional Development** is the area that attracts the greatest commentary when it comes to TAP initiatives. As stated earlier, upskilling is the premise of all TAP initiatives and the data yield from both these residencies is replete with incidences of both professionals learning new skills and methodologies from each other. However, what is notable in these residencies is that sometimes the learning can occur contrary to what was expected, with the artist learning arts skills from the teacher or the teacher learning about teaching resources/technology from the artist. Both were features of these residencies. As previously mentioned, the artist in Residency 1 was introduced to lacemaking by the teacher. In Residency 2, the teacher was introduced to remote facilitation by the artist. Skill and knowledge exchange can and does move in both directions in well-founded partnerships, sometimes in surprising ways.

However, research indicates that TAP initiatives needed to develop teacher awareness of the rationale underpinning arts-based activities (Kind et al., 2007; Morrissey & Kenny, 2021), if the practices are to be assimilated into a teacher's long-term pedagogical repertoire (Galton, 2008). Galton's research (2008) is interesting in that he identifies three levels of development in TA partnerships: the **initiation** stage, in which skill exchange occurs; the **re-orientation** stage, where "teachers likely to be receptive to theoretical implications behind the creative practitioners' approach"; and the **consolidation** stage, which is reached when participants are strongly disposed towards arts-in-education practices and are keen to "adapt the suggested approaches" (p. 78). While Galton focuses exclusively on teachers' development, we have noted in the data yield from our Irish I-TAP-PD residencies evidence that artists also undergo similar stages as they learn from teachers and children.

There was a myriad of insights gained by both partners in both residencies. In Residency 1, the teacher recognised how "[p]ersonal pieces and the storytelling are so effective" in engaging children in learning (T1RJ), while the artist noted how a "state of flow" was generated by "the repetitive skill [which] really helped to chill the energy in the room" (A1RJ). In Residency 2, the artist "learn[ed] how the Irish curriculum can be creatively used and negotiated" (A2GI) and the teacher realised that in order to conduct a child-led residency, "we needed to have much more feedback from the children after each session, not just in the middle or at the end of the residency" (T2RJ).

While the above are excellent examples of the nature of learning in terms of emerging insights for both professionals, learning that impacts the prac-



tices of each on a more profound level is what we ultimately seek when evaluating the impact of TAP on professional development. Some examples of such consolidated learning are documented below.

In Residency 1, in a summary statement in her Reflective Journal, the artist concludes how cumulative insights over the span of the residency have informed her arts-in-education practice:

My awareness of the variety of the knowledge, skills required and daily challenges of teachers is heightened. These insights help me to understand how artists can work in an effective partnership with teachers and to better understand curriculum requirements. (A1RJ)

Concurrently, her teacher partner came to a much clearer understanding of how children learn as a result of her artist partner introducing them to habits of mind she utilises in her own arts practice. In the data yield, the teacher regularly comments on how much the children are learning about themselves as learners. She subsequently concluded in her Reflective Journal how "children are becoming very aware of the creative habits of mind. The need to practice the skills are becoming very obvious to them. This should impact on other areas of their education and life in general" (T1RJ).

The partners in Residency 2 were united in what they perceived as the ultimate insight of their joint venture. The artist was enthusiastically adamant about the importance of what she learned:

I think the great success of our time together was that the children took part in this residency, and they evolved [our residency] in the way they

gave us their feedback ... it made sense to make them. This is the most important thing I will take for our residency. We can have all the planning done, but we have to remain alert to children's needs. (A2GI)

Her teacher partner also acknowledges that the decision to include the children's feedback in the residency's design affected her deeply. Her reflections on what she saw as "the impact of the residency on the children" prompted her to re-evaluate her own practice:

It makes me think about my teaching going forward. How can I elicit such a response ... I think it's all down to the child led focus ... getting them exploring something they can feel really passionate about. Then they don't realise they're learning about literacy, numeracy, history, geography science and so much more through the project. (T2GI)

This is powerful learning indeed.

## Conclusion

Within the TAP training-residency framework, artists and teachers learn how to work in partnership with each other. They also learn about each other's professional practices in a way which sheds light on the rationale that underpins the respective practices of each. Moreover, in witnessing and evaluating their own and each other's engagement with the children, they begin to re-appraise their own beliefs and practices. If we purport that TAP offers opportunity for professional development for teachers and artists, learning that evokes deep insight and can potentially impact practice must be evidenced by both. In quoting from our data yield, I will leave the final judgement of the success of these residencies in eliciting high quality learning and equal levels of

professional development for both artist and teachers to the readers of this article. What is important for us in I-TAP-PD is that we engage both professionals respectfully and equally in our programme. Each has much to learn from the other and it is in creating opportunities for respectful dialogue and praxis between the two domains, education and the arts, that experiential understanding of each other's professional rationale and reality occur. And it is on this bedrock, we posit, that best practices are most likely to emerge.

*Images by Brian Cregan.*

## Notes

1. I-TAP-PD is an Erasmus+ funded initiative currently being developed by teachers, artists, arts educators and researchers from Greece, Ireland, the Netherlands and Serbia.
2. A link to this Irish residency is provided here for any readers interested in exploring the nature of this residency further. It offers commentaries from the artist and the teacher on their residency experience alongside some images from the residency as it progressed. <https://artsineducation.ie/en/project/finding-the-common-thread/>

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### Abbreviations:

- **I-TAP-PD:** International Teacher-Artist Partnership – Professional Development, the programme we are developing in Greece, Ireland, Serbia and the Netherlands with the support of Erasmus+ funding. The programme is also known as I-TAP-PD, as it is essentially a Professional Development programme for artists and teachers.
- **TAP:** Teacher-Artist Partnership
- **TA:** Teacher-Artist
- **A1:** Artist 1
- **A2:** Artist 2
- **T1:** Teacher 1
- **T2:** Teacher 2
- **RJ:** Reflective Journal
- **GI:** Group Interview

**Vera McGrath** is qualified as a primary teacher who attended the National College of Art and Design (NCAD), Dublin part-time. In 2001, she left teaching to work full-time as an artist. In 2006, she undertook a half-time teaching post in Special Education while continuing in art. Returning to NCAD, she was awarded an MA in Visual Art Education (2011). Vera has been active in teacher Professional Development (PD) for 15 years and she was one of the original cohort who piloted TAP in Ireland (2014). She remains a core member of the TAP development team, presenting at conferences and facilitating training. In 2018, she wrote a research report for Dublin City Arts Office on the impact of artists-in-residencies on Early Childhood education and trained as a Visual Thinking Strategies facilitator. Retired from teaching, she has returned to her art practice and works as a TAP artist in schools.