The Essentiality of Playing Pretend

Imagination, Creativity, and Theatre-Based Teaching Artistry in the Early Childhood Virtual Classroom

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“The arts, it has been said, cannot change the world, but they may change human beings who might change the world.”

Maxine Greene

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Introduction

It was only noon on Saturday morning, but already had I gone out for a picnic, took a swim in the lake, and made friends with a laughing hyena named Nora. On Zoom, students, the teaching artist, Molly,[1] and I were acting out an imaginative story of our own creation, prompted from the question: what does it feel like to be sad? Soon after we finished playing pretend, Molly asked the group: "What was your favorite part of the story we told today?"

This moment hails from one of the many virtual classes I've sat in over the past year, watching, participating, and facilitating theatre-making among young learners. Here, at ages five and six, the students are some of the youngest I've worked with, and the big, playful choices I make in their company—mirroring those of the children themselves—stand in contrast to the more serious discussions I hold with high schoolers. As a theatre educator, however, I continually gravitate towards early childhood *because* of children's willingness to play. How they take on characters and develop plots in their own imagined worlds is my reminder: what is theatre but telling stories?

The actor's toolbox, a curricular aid used in many a theatre classroom,[2] recognizes this linkage between story and stage. Students who have heard the metaphor even once will readily list the tools housed inside. The body, voice, mind, and imagination, they'll explain, are all used by actors to tell stories. In theatre, we can transform our bodies to match that of the character we play and relate our movements to the action at hand. We can use our voices to bring characters to life and signal shifts in thoughts and feelings, and we can employ our minds to make logical

[1] Please note that I will refer to my own colleagues with pseudonyms.
[2] As if it were a bit of teaching artist "folklore," I have been unable to locate specific attribution for the idea of the actor's toolbox. Nevertheless, I'd like to credit teaching artist, Alissa Cordeiro, for first introducing it to me.

sense of the plot and concurrent responses as they unfold. Finally, and I'd argue most importantly, we can use our imagination to make meaning of the setting in which the story exists, a tool to uncover and unlock the pretend world of our theatre-making.

My introduction to the "actor's toolbox" was as a teaching assistant at a summer theatre class for first and second graders in 2019, where each day's objective was to strengthen these skills while acting out a picture book—in essence, representing, embodying, and re-creating the story we had just read. With each new book we performed, my curiosity in this informal educational space—where art-making was at the center of students' experience but not necessarily the *goal*—only grew. My experiences of theatre and education have always been intertwined (i.e. school was where I "did" theatre), but with this job, I found myself in a field where art was not treated as a separate or in addition to one's "true" learning but celebrated as an educative tool. What I had unexpectedly entered was the field of teaching artistry, and I was eager to keep exploring.

My growing interest in teaching artistry, in many ways, coalesced with the trajectory of the coronavirus' spread in the United States. Writing this in March 2021, we are a year into the COVID-19 pandemic, and it remains an unprecedented historical event whose impact cannot yet be traced completely, if ever, because we continue to live under its restrictions. Nonetheless, while the totality of its ramifications can't be determined, we can take note of significant changes across a diversity of sectors. At the pandemic's onset, for example, schools shifted to remote learning and have since operated on inconsistent models of instruction that are in-person, hybrid, or fully remote. Theatres, meanwhile, have been shuttered to the public, the performing arts an industry particularly hard-hit by the necessity of public health measures like social distancing and mask-wearing. This in-person closure, of course, includes the educational programming

common of regional theatres, such as continuing education (or "enrichment") classes in acting, dance, playwriting, or summer camps like I had taught only a year prior.

But theatre, an ever-responsive art, hasn't disappeared in the pandemic's midst; artists have found ways to transition their theatre-making online. In the past year, theatre companies of all sizes have produced plays for radio and Zoom, hosted talkbacks and interviews, and developed new ways of engagement across social media. This shift has also had theatre-based classes move from unused rehearsal rooms and dance studios to digital platforms like Zoom and Google Meet. I saw this in real-time: my summer 2020 internship with Children's Theatre Company (CTC) transitioned from its traditional in-person model of summer classes to a fully online structure. By necessity, teaching artists have adapted their work to the digital world—even if the transition was largely, as I was prone to repeating in interviews, learning while doing.

I say this because I have been learning while doing myself. Throughout my own time teaching online—a position I've continued during the writing of this thesis—I've been able to explore my initial point of curiosity: how do we learn through theatre? At CTC, I work with students across grade levels in a variety of theatre-related or theatre-adjacent subjects, but what continues to captivate my interest most is the very age group I stared with: early childhood. At this age, learning is parallel to play, and in the early years classroom, children are provided ample opportunity to develop understanding of the world and its many wonders. My continued curiosity about the way young children interact with the world leads me back to teaching artistry, a role that helps people shape their own meaning and knowledge through artistic practice. Teaching artists are not limited to work with children or adolescents, nor do they teach only theatre, but those that *do* create a space for young people to use their imagination as they

develop. The imagination feels so pivotal to this specific branch of teaching artistry that I found myself asking: what is its role?

It's in response to this question that my research, the end product of which you are reading, emerged. Inspired by the nation's shift to the "virtual classroom," I originally asked: how does the imagination appear in online instruction? Through early conversations with teaching artists, however, I realized that the driving question I needed is one that positions the digital nature of this current work as a lens through which to understand the relationship between the imagination and teaching artistry. And so, what I've come to ask is: what does the virtual classroom *reveal* about the role of imagination in early childhood theatre-based teaching artistry?

Throughout this piece, I present a range of answers to this question while striving to capture a picture of early childhood teaching artistry as it has appeared in this current moment. In the first chapter, "A Map to Creativity," I draw connections between the three areas of interest that ground this study: teaching artistry, early childhood, and the imagination. I present a definition of the teaching artist as an educator concerned with creative skill-building and find significant overlap between explanations of teaching artistry, creativity, childhood, and imaginative play. I then transition from the "what" to the "how," using the second chapter, "Centering Play" to explore in greater detail what the pedagogy of the imagination, instruction characteristic of early childhood teaching artistry, entails. I find that imagination holds a dual purpose: it is both a skill to strengthen and a means of instruction. Finally, the third chapter, "Joy and a Space to Be," investigates the perceived value behind early childhood teaching artistry as realized by teaching artists and broader society. I do this in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, exploring what children and adults alike gain from teaching artistry in a time of significant upheaval and uncertainty.

I draw these conclusions from ethnographic interviews with a select group of teaching artists. I had the pleasure of holding a variety of interviews over Zoom in the fall and winter of 2020, all with individuals who work in theatre education in some capacity in the United States, including theatres' education directors, artistic directors, and teaching artists. As you'll see in the pages that follow, however, I decided to focus on the voices of nine that share the experience of working as an early childhood theatre teaching artist online to collect and analyze testimonies most directly related to the research question at hand. I met these individuals by sharing my research blurb with contacts in the theatre industry and asking interested educators to write me for an interview. I also made use of "snowball sampling" by inviting participants to refer other early childhood teaching artists trained in theatre from their professional circles. As their artistic backgrounds indicate, however, theatre is a broad art form: **Grace** is a dancer; **Matt** is trained in musical theatre; **Autumn, Isabella,** and **Ryan** are actors; **Stephanie** and **Olivia** are stage managers; **Helen** is a puppeteer; **Sienna** is a director (but, as I will argue later, their specific training doesn't matter so much as their approach to teaching). Our conversations lasted on average fifty minutes and were designed as semi-structured interviews; I generated a list of open-ended questions to guide the discussion, but I welcomed new ideas from interviewees and strove to follow the natural "flow" of conversation. Finally, I describe my interviews as ethnographic because it was through such conversations that I learned about the community of teaching artists that my research involves.[3]

My process of analysis was also qualitative in nature. The nine interviews to which I decided to direct my focus were audio-recorded to a laptop to facilitate transcription. Following a

[3] Pankonien (2017) writes powerfully about the necessity of ethnographic interviewing: "The most ethically correct (and also effective, efficient, etc.) way to get at the thoughts and beliefs and understandings of other human beings is by asking them, in addition to observing them, thereby allowing *real human beings* to have *real voices and a real say* in what and why and how they do and say and think as they do."

two-month-long period of interviewing, I transcribed each audio recording, taking note of emerging ideas that related to my primary research question (*what is the role of the imagination?*)—effectively creating an "index" of themes. I created a separate document for each theme, on which I grouped corresponding quotes and anecdotes from individual interviews, findings from previous literature, and records from my own fieldwork journal. From this process, I was able to form a loose outline and develop additional questions to ask participants by email, engaging in what I term a digital dialogic exchange. Of the nine teaching artists, seven replied; their responses are included throughout this piece as well. At the request of Brown's Human Research Protection Program/Institutional Review Board Office, I refer to all teaching artists, their students, their employers, and any other identifying information with pseudonyms that participants were invited to choose themselves; I otherwise designated a pseudonym for them.

I should note that the role of the participants' voices in an ethnographer's report remains a contentious debate. A sociologist, for instance, might be more apt to absorb an interviewee's voice into their own analysis, while a cultural anthropologist or folklorist might be more explicit in presenting the voices of informants woven with their own.[4] Nevertheless, I've chosen deliberately to center the voices of those I interviewed because I wish not to act as a scholarly intermediary in this specific exploration of the imagination. I'd like to allow these educators to articulate their own experience as teaching artists instead of having me explain what they said to me. What results is not replicable, but as Welch and Piekkari conclude, replicability is "not necessarily meaningful" in qualitative research because I as researcher have taken on the role of the research instrument.[5] Moreover, I write just as educator and scholar Laura K. Reeder does in

[4] The representation of interview subjects, particularly voices, has been a matter of concern in social sciences since the 1990s, particularly among practitioners of "reflexive ethnography." See the essays in *Reflexivity & Voice* by Hertz (1997).
[5] Welch and Piekkari, "Qualitative Research."

her ethnographic work on teaching artists: for both the "academic readership" and "the community of practitioners who inform it."[6] Here, I cannot claim complete objectivity, but nor do I think can any qualitative researcher. I consider myself a teaching artist and so I inherently write from a place of bias; I *am* a teaching artist and I *study* teaching artistry because I believe that it holds meaning.

Ultimately, this process of research, in which I crossed the experiences of those I met with my own at this digital juncture, had me reflect on the central role of the imagination in teaching artistry and, likewise, how teaching artists must always be recreating themselves and experiences for their students in a world that is in flux.

[6] Reeder, "Teaching Artistry," 17.

1.

A Map for Creativity

> *Hello friends, my name is Matt, and I'm a teaching artist! I love to use my body, my voice and my imagination to tell stories… Today, we are going to be using our bodies, our voices, and our imagination to bring our story to life. But first, we are going to need to take out our imagination box. So in front of you, there's a box.*
>
> *What color is your box? My favorite color is blue, so my box is blue! How big is your box? Is your box really, really big? Or really, really small? My box is kind of in the middle, so it's going to be between really, really big and really, really small. So let's open up our box. 1… 2… 3… Let's all do that. Open your box, ready? 1… 2… 3… And let's take out our imagination caps and put them on. Can we all do that?*[7]

Here, Matt takes a short pause, anticipating the response of the children who will later watch and play along with this pre-recorded video session. She's filmed this clip for use by the city library as part of their pandemic-response programming, one of many videos that young learners can view while at their homes. Following along with Matt myself, I nod in agreement: I too like to use my body, my voice, and my imagination to tell stories! I continue to watch and find my own box in front of me—yellow, tiny—and make sure to fasten my "imagination cap" securely to my head. I also watch and wonder: Matt introduces herself as a teaching artist. What does it mean to be one?

I start us with this question—what is a teaching artist?—because it is the precursor to the investigation at the center of this study; I believe myself unable to discuss the role of imagination as it appears in teaching if I do not first define the individual who facilitates its manifestation in the classroom. The process of defining teaching artistry, however, is not as straightforward as the inquiry, the boundaries between "artist" and "educator" loose, a title that can technically apply to

[7] Pre-recorded video lesson submitted to author, October 14, 2020.

both the teacher who uses art as a pedagogical tool and the artist who teaches classes using their creative medium. Depending on one's definition of choice, the US sees teaching artists in up to one-third of its public schools,[8] a statistic that still doesn't account for the prisons, hospitals, theaters, nursing homes, museums, and other community centers in which teaching artists work.

The profession's continued ambiguity may be a matter of research: even a brief scan illustrates the scarcity of formal literature about teaching artistry. *Teaching Artist Journal*, one of the few sources to name teaching artistry as a discrete discipline, is designed for all those who work at the intersection of arts and learning.[9] In a survey of teaching artistry in the United States, Ulvund bases it on skill, describing a teaching artist as "a professional artist with the competency needed to work in and through the arts in an educational and/or community setting."[10] Eric Booth, known informally but widely as the "father of the field,"[11] defines a teaching artist as one "who chooses to include artfully educating others, beyond teaching the technique of the artform, as an active part of a career."[12] If there is an emerging theme among these definitions, it is that teaching artistry emerges from the junction where the arts and education meet, their breadth demonstrative of all that a teaching artist can be.

Professionally, and to that point, it is similarly unclear who exactly "qualifies" as a teaching artist. Teaching Artists Guild, an advocacy organization based in the US, regards a teaching artist as "a practicing professional artist with the complementary skills and sensibilities of an educator, who engages people in learning experiences in, through and about the arts."[13] The Lincoln Center for Education, where it's said "teaching artist" was first coined,[14] hires practicing

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[8] Snyder and Fisk, "National Survey of Teaching Artists," 3.
[9] See the homepage of *Teaching Artist Journal* at https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/htaj20/current.
[10] Ulvund, "Age of the Teaching Artist," 33.
[11] International Teaching Artists Collaborative, "Eric Booth."
[12] Booth, "What is a Teaching Artist?"
[13] Teaching Artists Guild, "What is a Teaching Artist?"
[14] Tannenbaum, "The Teaching Artist Field," 161.

artists who are committed to working with educators. There is no formal certification required to "become" a teaching artist, nor any criterion for what dictates a "practicing" artist. Rather, as another known teaching artist Daniel Levy observes, teaching artists are "dependent on an artist-to-artist oral tradition for technique, clarification, and insight"[15] to define their occupation.

Helen, a teaching artist of more than six years, elaborates on the title's indefiniteness, relating "artistry" to the positioning of oneself to a creative medium:

> I think what's behind [the term] is just like an artist, an active artist, in any artistic field that also teaches or facilitates their art or engages in the art with communities. Or that's how I, like for myself, [how] I define it. That I'm not compared to like a full-time—but also, I think it's so, yeah, it's so blurry. The lines of full-time teacher in a school in an art form can… many of them are still artists. Cause I think it goes hand in hand that often you're not, or you don't just teach in art form, but you engage in it yourself because it's part of your being in different ways.

The "blurriness" that Helen names is a return to the question at hand: what are the lines between teacher, artist, and teaching artist, and who draws them? Like Helen, I've come to consider the act of defining a teaching artist "slippery," not because teaching artists lack a strong grasp of their own work but because teaching artistry remains a profession by personal identification. That is, to cite again Booth, "we still live in a time when you are a teaching artist if you say you are."[16] Teaching artist is a self-determined title, teaching artistry a group-determined field.

This process of defining brings into question the necessity of a title that not every artist choose to use—or knows to. I'd argue that teaching artistry is so elusive that it practically becomes a point of discovery; one doesn't plan to be a teaching artist so much as they stumble upon it, walk into it, realize that, as Matt proclaimed, teaching artistry is "what [she was]

[15] Levy, *A Teaching Artist's Companion*, 4.
[16] Booth, "What is a Teaching Artist?"

doing!"[17] As I earlier noted, I myself was in college when I first heard of the "teaching artist" after taking on a teaching assistant position at a local theatre. I loved theatre and was passionate about educational studies, but I lacked the language to categorize my interests as one discipline until then, a narrative that mirrors many of the teaching artists I interviewed. Isabella, who had studied theatre in college, didn't realize that teaching artistry was a profession until graduating and taking a position in a theatre's education department; Olivia likewise discovered how to "combine [her] two passions of theater and children" through a postgraduate apprenticeship. Autumn even had the professional experience that one could classify as "teaching artistry" but she didn't know it as such: "When I was a freshman [in college], I started volunteering with this amazing company in Minneapolis that creates real theater with adults with disabilities. And I was like, this is brilliant. This, and again, this was like, what if I focused on applied theater? But when I was a freshman, I didn't know it was a field. So I was just doing theater in unconventional spaces. It was revelatory to me." Nestled within these discoveries is the recognition that theatre can be (is) an educational tool, a medium through which we can teach and learn, and often, the unconventional theatre space is one also deeply familiar to us all: the classroom.

The individuals I interviewed hold tightly to their awareness of theatre's educative potential and their own title. Whether by individual affinity ("Yes, I work as a teaching artist") and/or by the nature of their employment ("Yes, I was hired as a teaching artist"), they all use "teaching artist" to describe themselves. And yet in asking them each how they personally define teaching artistry, it appears from their responses that it's almost easier to explain what a teaching artist is not—or not *just*. Sienna tells me: "A teaching artist is somebody who teaches through the

[17] I'd hypothesize that this elusiveness might, in part, explain for the field's majority demographics of white, cisgender women, as the chance to make such a "discovery" is itself a reflection of who has access to and institutional support within the American theatre industry.

medium as opposed to a theater teacher who teaches theater," a sentiment Ryan echoes: "It's almost teaching, not necessarily subjects. Like, of course, you learn about theater and stuff, but it's almost more teaching how to behave with other people… It's a lot of getting comfortable in your own skin." Teaching artistry, by their answers, is an interest in learning beyond that of the art form, or, as Stephanie notes, interest in "creating the critical thinker and the person who is using creativity to problem solve... the skills-based learning." It would be incorrect to label the teaching artist only as an arts instructor because teaching artistry positions art as the springboard for acquiring, practicing, and applying general "creative skills."[18]

Having grown up in what she describes as a "conventional theatre training space," Autumn also distinguishes teaching artistry from traditional "theatre teaching" by its purpose. Following her undergraduate program in acting, she explains: "And then, I was like, I can't… I just got to keep doing teaching work. So I started [doing] a lot of assistant work and creating. I was really—or I knew that I didn't want to train young… Like just the word that I just said, train. I didn't want to do what I'd been like. I need to do… I wanted to be creating spaces where we could create our own work." Autumn's refusal of "training" reflects a larger divide between product- and process-oriented learning. Whereas the theatre teacher trains in an art form, the teaching artist will use an art form; art here is not a benchmark to reach but a tool to employ. To Stephanie's earlier point, then, the teaching artist's curriculum is designed around skills not only in the art but also creativity itself: one's ability to generate new ideas, to uncover possibilities, and to use their imagination.

And it is creativity fostered in a group. While Sienna is careful to emphasize how defining is a personal act ("I use [teaching artist] for myself. But I also know not to apply it to

[18] Consider, similarly, the difference between "arts education" and "arts *in* education."

other people because, yeah, people get very precious about things"—teaching artist once again a title you *claim*), I believe it notable the ample overlap in how each teaching artist spoke about the "ensemble" in their work. By their collective account, teaching artistry is a process of creating, making, designing, devising with and among others, its main tenet perhaps the idea of a participatory practice.[19] The teaching artist's job is to create and maintain a space where participants feel empowered to make use of their own creativity. Ryan, who works exclusively in early childhood, is more informal: "I think it's about making the kids come out of their shell a little bit. And if they are already a lot out of their shell, then it's about focusing in." Creativity exists on a spectrum and so it becomes both the responsibility and the challenge of the teaching artist to meet students all.

The attention to student agency is why many of the interviewees refer to their work not as teaching but facilitation, the teaching artist but a resource for the people in the room. Matt even characterizes her teaching style as "participatory": "[I'm] really working from the place of what my participants want to do. I have whatever goals that I need to get accomplished [but] what are their interests? What are they currently learning about? What are they excited by?" In the corresponding traditions of Freire and Boal,[20] these teaching artists build on the ideas that students bring to the classroom, their prior experience and their creativity in direct relation to one another; they do not dictate possibilities but instead offer artistic ways forward. Isabella speaks on this idea of trust: "I do a lot of creating theater when it becomes like, "'Yeah, let's totally make this… or yes, of course, let's make a store!' Having those moments, I think [is] really

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[19] I draw this phrasing from the UK, where those who do the work of a teaching artist are known as "artists who engage in participatory settings" and/or "community-based artists." Collective Encounters, a participatory arts group based in Liverpool, document the history of this terminology well on their website, collective-encounters.org.uk.
[20] Augusto Boal, a revolutionary theatre-practitioner known best for the Theatre of the Oppressed model, drew inspiration for his interactive, participant-driven approach from the critical pedagogy championed by Paulo Freire.

exciting. And I know from the outside, those moments can seem a little chaotic, but for me, what's really important is trusting the participants and the young people in the room and creating and building on their ideas." By trusting her students, Isabella honors their creativity (and if this collective making is "chaotic," it's only because creativity is itself a method of experimentation). Similarly, Olivia's approach to teaching is one of "let's come up with some new ideas together." Speaking of her philosophy as a teaching artist who, like Ryan, works only in early childhood, she expresses an appreciation for this reciprocity:

> If we're in the jungle and, you know, somebody wants to be a snowman, I'll be like, "You know what, like, I don't think snowmen usually belong in the jungle, but maybe it was a really cold day in the jungle. So let's be snowmen." I don't want to give wrong information, but at the same time, I want to make sure that every kid is allowed to make it as big or as creative of decisions as they can. So I think that's my favorite part is just being able to say yes to whatever they want to do and letting them form the plan, form how long we're going to do something, and just really letting them take the leash.

What Isabella and Olivia both describe is the type of engagement teaching artistry holds central: moments where students can and do "take the leash."

For some teaching artists, metaphor best captures the communal interaction between teacher and student. Autumn, for example, relates teaching artistry to the process of "creating a map and a structure for people to be creative, and then you're using their ideas to build on that." For Helen, who considers herself a theatre-maker for young audiences, teaching artistry is a "symbiosis that feeds itself… you have to work with young people to know how to make that art and what you learn in one space feeds the other space." Grace, meanwhile, likens teaching artistry to the actual practice of creation:

> I remember someone telling me that the great thing about coming into the classroom as someone who has their own artistic practice is that you apply all the same creative skills that you do with whatever your medium is, say theater in this case, music, dance, visual arts, video editing, you know, whatever it may be. And then you can use those creative skills and that becomes… your art becomes how you sort of design and present and

> perform, in a way, your class. And you know, it can be the full scope of the class and then down to the day by day, second by second. How do you sculpt it?
>
> So I really… that came from a mentor to me and that's how I have thought about it ever since – that when I step into a classroom space, yes, like I am a theater artist or I'm teaching music or dance, but really the art in this moment is the class. Like if I'm the sculptor, I'm sculpting it, I'm scripting it. I'm writing it. I'm using my artistic skills to create materials. Even to like set-up the space of the classroom feels like you're just… I think one of my mentors put it as like you're designing an experience, you know, like some people design haunted houses. But we design this experience that is like a growth point in someone's life.

What Grace recognizes, with the support of her mentor, is the doubled interaction between teaching artistry and creativity; it is both what you teach *towards* and *how* you teach. In response to my question of how she's thought about her work as a teaching artist, Stephanie elaborates on a similar framing:

> I, at least, as a teaching artist have really struggled with this because I think that my artistry is teaching. And so rather than thinking of my arts being theater, like… I guess I am a theater artist, but I'm also a singer and I play cello and I have a lot of different personal artistry, but I think that the thing that I've worked the hardest to craft is my teaching artistry. So rather than being an artist who teaches, I think that my teaching artistry is the act of teaching and the way that you approach teaching.

Here, we can take the title as its two literal components: one's artistry, as Stephanie poses, is their teaching, the teaching artist someone practiced in an arts-integrated pedagogy. Isabella puts it simply: teaching artistry is "its own art form."

• • •

Though the teaching artists I interviewed differ in the focus of their theatrical training—a range that, again, includes acting, musical theatre, dance, puppetry, and stage management—they share the experience of teaching early childhood. Following the classification of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), I use early childhood here to refer to children from birth to age 8, or infancy to third grade.[21] This life period is marked by rapid

[21] NAEYC, "Our Mission and Strategic Direction."

skill development, from language acquisition to fine- and gross-motor abilities, as well as the growth of one's awareness of their self in place with society. Childhood psychologists, most notably the pioneers of educational psychology, Piaget and Vygotsky, debate the exact influences on human development, but one philosophy is widely shared: that children are active in constructing their own knowledge of themselves and the world. For this reason, I describe early childhood as a period of "meaning-making," the stage at which children are tasked with making physical, cognitive, linguistic, and emotional sense of changes both within and around themselves.

To engage in this sustained period of discovery, children rely on the tools already familiar and at their disposal: their senses. It is through their senses that children interact with the world, and it is with input from their senses that they learn. As such, early childhood classrooms will often center multisensory engagement by providing an array of experiences that welcome a child's inquiry. Recalling my own moments teaching young children, it is a patchwork of dance and music, arts and crafts, theatre games, questions like "What type of color do you feel like today?" and "Do you like to tell stories?", art here its own form of multisensory learning. This instinctual curiosity and creativity—the impulse to discover what is possible, and beyond—was commonly cited by interviewees as the reason they work with such young learners. Drawing on her experience teaching both the very young (0-3 years old) and the young (3-8 years old), for example, Helen describes why she's drawn to work in early childhood:

> Part of it is my person. That's how I go through the world. Similar to like how babies go through the world [is] just in my own personality, being really sensory-forward and very process-oriented and very want to be hands-on, want to experience the world, and want to immerse myself in sensory experiences. So I feel a kinship with the very young, the way that they just go through the world and how they process things. And then I think that just how they see the world is fascinating. And we talk a lot about that, like seeing the world through the eyes of babies… that is the goal because they see the world so differently and follow that way of just following your curiosity and the joy and that everything is new

and exciting for a young child.

At the core of Helen's explanation is, again, a child's innate curiosity, an inquisitive lens through which children (and by her description, she) comprehend who and where they are.

Of significant note, however, is that the sensory engagement offered in an early-years setting—through movement, sound, touch, etc.—not only promotes a child's cognitive awareness but creativity itself. Helen's observations of how children understand the world point to the same relationship between learning and creativity that Vygotsky describes in "Imagination and Creativity in Childhood": "Creativity is present, in actuality, not only when great historical works are born but also whenever a person imagines, combines, alters, and creates something new."[22] These processes go hand-in-hand, constructing knowledge its own form of creation.

And much like the teaching artist who teaches creativity by teaching *creatively*, a child's creativity is strengthened the more opportunities they have to apply it through their senses; as Vygotsky later writes, "if we want to build a relatively strong foundation for a child's creativity, what we must do is broaden the experiences we provide him with."[23] For educators, this is knowledge on which instruction can be built; as Duffy finds for her text *Supporting Creativity and Imagination*, children who are supported in their creative faculty grow in their ability to explore and comprehend their worlds and find opportunity to reach and apply new understandings of themselves.[24] Creativity is instinctive—the very foundation of our experience—but it can be fortified, the job of a teacher to provide time and space for it to be applied.

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[22] Vygotsky, "Imagination and Creativity in Childhood," 10.
[23] Ibid., 15.
[24] Duffy, *Supporting Creativity and Imagination,* 9.

In early childhood education, then, there is a focus on children's sense of creativity because educators have a specific role to play and, developmentally, *that is how children learn.* If teaching artistry is, in Booth's words, "the artful, effective, engaging, successful, joyful, transformative, proven way to guide humans into and through [experiences]" that expand our understanding of the world,[25] the early childhood teaching artist has the benefit of working with students whose meaning-making is already grounded in play, imagination, and the desire to "combine the old in new ways."[26] These teaching artists, in other words, facilitate art-making among a group that is developmentally primed to expand their own understandings of the world. In this framing, I'm reminded of the goal Olivia sets for herself across her teaching artistry work: her classes are "hopefully providing a creative outlet for [students] and [are about] being heard and being wacky and connecting with people who are different than them." A manifesto by way of listing her values, Olivia's hope to build space for young learners' creativity in an ensemble setting returns to the imaginative, critical thinking that a teaching artist looks to strengthen.

But in early childhood, this objective is coupled with an intentional collapse of mediums. The theatre teaching artist blends drama with dance, music, and visual arts for young learners, disciplinary divides ignored in favor of a more general "artful" approach to teaching and learning. Of her own practice, Grace explains: "Especially with younger kids, I go into a teaching space thinking more interdisciplinary and like multi-disciplinary because at that age it's so useful." The combined arts curriculum might be best captured by the routine activities incorporated into their lessons: Ryan describes how he had his students draw at the end of every class; many others mention the use of song and dance with early learners, be it singing hello and goodbye songs, moving together to warm-up the body, or clapping together in rhythm.

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[25] Booth, "What is a Teaching Artist?"
[26] Vygotsky, "Imagination and Creativity in Childhood," 12.

Mentioning how puppets and her ukulele both appear with frequency in her classroom, Helen classifies the use of art in early childhood as "fluid": "I think the younger the ages, the more fluid… [there's] just so much fluidity between the art forms. It's dancing, singing, playing. It's just the same, it's not different." There is a spectrum of artistic opportunity, and the early learner—and the early childhood teaching artist—makes use of them all.

Here within then lies the distinction of the early childhood teaching artist from teaching artists at large—or, perhaps, it's better to say that those who work in early childhood exemplify most easily and most visibly the job of a teaching artist. In these theatre classes, young children are not expected to learn how to act or how to write a play any more so than they are expected to know how to read complex text or complete multi-step algebraic equations; even with the "slipperiness" of teaching artistry aside, teaching to this developmental stage, it doesn't make pedagogical sense to combine curriculum with artistic-oriented skills training. Instead, theatre (as well as dance, music, drawing and crafts) can be and is used to bolster creativity across contexts, the nature of early childhood an invitation to teach artfully. We classify a teaching artist as an educator who teaches creative skills through art, but for the early childhood teaching artist, there is no other way to teach.

So multi- and interdisciplinary is their teaching that I'd argue that early childhood teaching artists invite us to re-consider what theatre actually *is*. Stephanie sees this question within the confines of the age group—that is, as she says, "'theatre' in early education is really supporting play and the use of imagination." Autumn, however, carries the broadening of the form to theatre at large. As she states: "If anyone tells me like, Autumn, why are you just listening to music and playing with Play-Doh in your theater class? We have to expand our idea of what theater is," her "we" a call to individuals of all ages. Theatre doesn't necessarily require

a stage or a story with a beginning, middle, and end, it may simply ask us to engage our imaginations and see a (the) world anew.

It's within this conflation—that is, theatre as an output of imagination, or a function—that we find, in turn and again, the imaginative intersection at which (theatre) teaching artistry and early childhood education sit. In both, creativity is to be used and to be learned, the creative self a testament to what imagination allows us to do. For an early childhood teaching artist, the classroom becomes a space to build, honor, and capitalize on the wonder and imagination that comes so naturally to children.

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And so am I brought to the last concept that this conversation encompasses: the imagination. I believe that imagination, at its essence, is the ability to meaningfully explore the idea of things without direct input of the senses. However, similar to the way that teaching artistry is "slippery" because its meaning is dependent on the individual using it, imagination too fails to hold a precise definition. It is the production of mental images, the ability to generate something "new," and a process of internalized meaning-making. Public understanding of the imagination is so broad that interest in it spans disciplines (the arts with the most obvious claim), but as scholar Stephen Asma reminds, we cannot ignore the fundamental function of our imaginations. It drives human experience, serves as a way that we can find, propose, and refine possibilities; fittingly, Asma declares imagination "the possibility-maker."[27] I'm known to call it a human "superpower," less as a scientific claim that we hold an uncanny or exceptional ability over other species but more in the respect that our imaginations are tied to all that we do. Vygotsky speaks in absolutes, but his point is well-made: "Imagination, as the basis of all

[27] Asma, *The Evolution of Imagination*, n.p.

creative activity, is an important component of absolutely all aspects of cultural life, enabling artistic, scientific, and technical creation alike."[28]

Like Stephanie and Autumn, who describe how imaginary thought shapes their work, I'm inclined to connect imagination and theatre because I believe them to be natural complements to one another. If imagination is our ability to create without tangible sensory input, then theatre is in an exercise in its manifestation, an artistic practice in which we cannot engage if we don't honor the very illusion of the narrative at hand. The assistance of props, scenery, or sound effects cannot discount the task that faces audiences and actors alike: to believe that the story unfolding is based in real. In fact, Grace locates theatre in the context *of* the imagination. I ask her how imagination appears both in her artistic work and in her teaching, and she responds:

> Imagining is a huge part of what we do. If I can imagine that this is happening, then suddenly we're all in this like shifted reality. In theater we say like, we suspend our disbelief. We're all in this magical suspension of disbelief where, oh, hey, I'm smelling that invisible flower, or I'm kicking an imaginary soccer ball. And I can really sense that it's there or I can feel all the feelings associated with it. Or when I watch somebody else do it, I'm seeing it and I'm associating the feelings with it. And then it starts to just build that understanding of like, that's what theater is.

From Grace's experience, the imagination is not only a "huge part" of theatre-making, but the very foundation of it. Our imaginations allow us to access stories shared onstage; if we couldn't make sense without our senses, we would be unable to dream of fictional worlds, to act out, and to play pretend.

The linkage between theatre and the imagination is reminiscent of Vygotsky's assertion about play, that is, what we witness as children's play is their imagination externalized into action.[29] Play seems to be a characteristic "mode" of childhood, so ubiquitous that it historically escaped close attention from psychologists and scholars alike (as theatre educator Natalie Crohn

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[28] Vygotsky, "Imagination and Creativity in Childhood," 9.
[29] Vygotsky, "Play and its role," 16.

Schmitt wrote of academic research throughout the 1900s, there was "low prestige in which play as an area of observation [had] been held"[30]). But play is central and instinctual to children's processing; research shows that a child's desire to make meaning, a characteristic of early childhood, translates itself to a desire to play.[31] When I later prompt her to speak on the role of play in her work, Grace speaks to the same idea: "Cause kids play all the time, you know, when they're home… and they play with other kids. It's sort of intuitive when we're young that we play pretend and we play with other kids and we be what we want to be and we act it out." The intuitive nature of play is reflective of a child's desire to construct meaning; play is both, as Vygotsky argues, "the imaginary, illusory realization of unrealizable desires" (Grace's "we be what we want to be") and an opportunity to separate thought from action, meaning from object.[32]

Of course, play itself spans form and function—one can play a board game, play a sport, play outside—but of most interest to me is the concept of "imaginative play." As the name suggests, imaginative play is the use of the imagination to act out experiences that are found interesting; we could also call it "make-believe" or "playing pretend." Piaget equates imaginative play with "symbolic play," which he describes as the use of symbols to represent thought; this includes objects that find meaning outside of their traditional contexts.[33] Vygotsky, meanwhile, believes that imagination is essential to all play and that a child's make-believe is "not simply a reproduction of what he has experienced, but a creative reworking of the impressions he has acquired."[34] Duffy explains further the value that children locate in this form of play: "Imaginative play develops when children experience this frustrating gap between their needs

[30] Crohn Schmitt, "Theatre and Children's Pretend Play," 219.
[31] Goldstein, *Play in Children's Development*, 9.
[32] Vygotsky, "Play and its role," 7.
[33] Piaget, *Play, Dreams, and Imitation in Childhood*, 2.
[34] Vygotsky, "Imagination and Creativity in Childhood," 11.

and the gratification of these needs. But while this desire cannot be realized in the real world it can be satisfied in the imaginative world, where they can pretend to pour the tea and offer it to their parents. The imaginative world children create enables them to realize in their imagination the things that cannot be realized in reality. Through imaginative play children resolve the tensions of everyday life."[35] Building on Vygotsky's proposition that play is essentially "wish fulfilment,"[36] Duffy offers a purpose to this use of the imagination: to create a sensible world when the circumstances of reality do not match a child's needs.

Similarly crucial to imaginative play is its deliberate "unstructured-ness." This is not to say that it lacks intention—Duffy makes clear that a child's imaginary play is purposeful—but rather, that it is left open-ended to the wishes of the individual(s) playing. And it is in these differing intentions that Ryan distinguishes theatre from imaginative play. For me, he elaborates:

> Theatre is for others. Play is for ourselves. I believe that if someone is participating in theatre in some capacity, whether that's by doing a show or taking a theatre class, then the goal is ultimately to create a work of art that others will hopefully enjoy. And that goes for anyone involved: actors, directors, designers… It's a collaborative process and people can play around and have a good time, but one must never forget the final product must be completed to show to others. Play, on the other hand, is more selfish in nature. When humans play, it's because we ourselves are looking for enjoyment for ourselves and the companions involved.

Trained as an actor, Ryan is understandably aware that theatre is creativity on display and art to be shown. However, I find in his distinction not a complete separation of theatre from play but, rather, a re-positioning of their boundaries—that is, a way of understanding the broad areas in which they overlap. On this idea, he explains:

> I do believe that the skills you learn in theatre training will only bolster your play. When in the classroom, either in a theatre class or normal elementary school class, I use theatre skills to scaffold play. For example, some kids may go into the "dramatic play" section of their class where there's often a kitchenette or a table and chairs and they will feel the need to be as precise as possible; a spatula is a spatula and a tomato is a tomato. We, as

[35] Duffy, 53.
[36] Vygotsky, "Play and its role," 8.

> teachers, can go in and expand on that and say, "Well, this block is a cup. And this hot dog is a wand." Or if you've got kids already doing that, the teacher can bring in a new element, such as imaginary objects.

What Ryan names as "theatre skills" we can also describe as use of the imagination. It is our imaginations that allow us to pretend an object is something that it is not, a symbolic transfer of meaning that is itself a form of play.

And so too, then, are theatre and play inextricably linked, a reciprocal relationship in which theatrical skills support play and play is a launchpad for theatre-making. Nellie McCaslin, a pioneer of theatre education in the U.S., asserts not only that "theatre begins in play, from which with guidance it develops a dramatic structure of its own," but moreover, that "the imagined reality that starts in play moves an audience to identify with the protagonist and go with him or her to another place, another time, on an adventure. With it come understanding and a new way of looking at things."[37] McCaslin writes of the young audience observing, but when using theatre as an early childhood teaching artist, the performer and the audience are one and the same. The children are acting while also watching their peers' performance in the same imaginary world. Duffy observes similarly of play and theatre's shared skill in creating understand of others: "There is a close connection between imaginative play and drama. Imaginative play is the beginning of drama. Drama is about our ability to feel what it would be like to be in someone else's shoes."[38]

What I write of theatre, I extend to drama. The difference between "theatre" and "drama" appears slight, but it has warranted significant theoretical consideration in the related fields of applied theatre and theatre education. In the most notable literature on the difference, Bailin observes that "drama is seen as having to do with *the experience of the learner* whereas theatre is

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[37] McCaslin, "Seeking the Aesthetic," 15.
[38] Duffy, 86.

about *communication with an audience*."[39] Colloquially, however, there was a tendency among those I interviewed to use theatre and drama interchangeably, a linguistic switch I do myself. I believe this is not done as disregard for accurate language (if done consciously at all), but rather in the recognition that, as educator and practitioner Gavin Bolton, quoted in Schonmann, argues, "drama and theatre are essentially the same dramatic art form… All good drama and theatre seek the simple action to embody significance."[40] To Bolton's list, I would add only imaginative play, inspired by Autumn's proclamation about the theatre she facilitates among preschoolers: "It's play. It's all imaginative play."

To that point, if I struggle to make precise explanations, it is merely a reflection of what this chapter indicates: that the terminology of early childhood teaching artistry is so closely linked that their definitions bleed together. Teaching is creativity, which is imagination, which is play, which is theatre. Helen references this cyclical relationship best: "And just their imagination, like that it's so play. Play is the language of the young child and what's the basis of everything that I do teaching and doing theater, which is based in imagination." The work of a teaching artist is inherently interconnected, as she continues to describe:

> So what is the distinction? I don't think there is one. Maybe it's about the purposes for it, like playing is a way of processing the world. That's how children use play, but then there are also performative moments because they have this extended experience going into a play world—like process drama, but it's completely led by the children. And you look at performative moments like, we're playing and I'm going to play you the thing that I played before or I'm going to perform this story that we played before, and so all these different consciousnesses come about. Going in and out of the play or going in and out of role can also be this performative aspect of it. So I don't know if there is a distinction.

Here again we find a collapse: between theatre and play, imagination and creativity. And what Helen knows from her teaching artistry practice is reflected in theory as well: to return to

[39] Emphasis in original. Bailin, "The Role of the Aesthetic," 423.
[40] Schonmann, "Master versus Servant," 36.

Vygotsky once more, he finds that "drama, more than any other form of creation, is closely and directly linked to play, which is the root of all creativity in children."[41] The intersecting beliefs on theatre, play, and the imagination harken back to the work of Viola Spolin, one of the first reported teaching artists.[42] Teaching at the Hull House, Spolin developed her now-famous improvisational approach to directing through the use of creative play with students. As Rabkin et al. report, "[Spolin's] great insight was that the roots of theater are in imaginative play, and that the impulse to make theater is in everyone."[43] I mention Spolin only as an indication of what early childhood teaching artists have long known: that their work is not a matter of "teaching theatre" but affirming the natural faculties of children.

I've positioned this chapter at the junction between teaching artists, early childhood, and imagination and play because I believe an understanding of who and what teaching artistry entails is a necessary foundation for any exploration of teaching through and with the imagination, as I will do in the following chapter. But here, what we find at the center is a claim of imagination's importance. To quote Grace, "you have to play and you have to show mountains of comfort and appreciation for the practice of pretending and playing as a core part of your theater learning." And if we appreciate play, we too express thanks for creativity and the imagination—the early childhood teaching artist's trifecta.

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[41] Vygotsky, "Imagination and Creativity in Childhood," 71.
[42] Rabkin et al., *Teaching Artists and the Future*, 14.
[43] Ibid.

2.

Centering Play

> *Today, I thought we could pretend to be someone who is an astronaut. An astronaut is someone who travels to space! Let's imagine that we are going to travel to space. We probably need to get dressed. Does someone have an idea of what we need to bring? And wait, how do we get to space? (A rocket ship!)*
>
> *Is there somewhere in your space that is YOUR rocket ship? My pillow is going to become my rocket ship—do want to find your rocket ship? When you're ready to blast off, put your hand on your head and unmute your mic. Looks like everyone is ready: can we count down from 3 together? 3… 2… 1… Blast off!*
>
> *Woah, we are so high up in space! What if we go out of our rockets and floated? What would that look like? Show me how you float in space!*[44]

With this request, students would begin to move about their space, taking exaggerated large steps or leaping across the room, some with arms out, others with a wide open mouth. I'd follow my own instructions as well, moving in slow motion as if I were floating, my computer screen a kaleidoscope of windows into imaginary voyages across space. I planned this creative drama exercise—called such because of its focus on the process of "make-believe" to collectively experience the same imagined world—to be conducted specifically on Zoom for children ages three, four, and five. Practicing it among my colleagues (all of whom are nearly two decades older than the intended audience), I found myself more aware of the imaginary nature of what I was doing but took no less delight in the result. This exercise demands use of the imagination; it succeeds if you're willing to play pretend.

In early childhood, the imagination is crucial, a tool necessitated by the desire to understand even what one cannot see. For children, the boundary between the "real" and "not

[44] Language written by author, November 2020.

real" is often rigidly held, reflective of their growing ability to separate meaning from tangible experience. (Consider, as an example, the child who will proclaim you're "wrong" if you declare you are smaller or younger than they know you to be.) Children's frequent use of the imagination coincides with the development in their understanding of what is (or can be) true of reality. This phenomenon falls under studies of appearance-reality distinction, or what Gopnik and Astington define as the ability to name that "this looks like X but really is Y."[45] It's for this reason that when I work with young learners, I'm careful to preface each activity with a disclaimer: in the space flight creative drama, for example, we're not actually going to outer space, but with our imaginations, we can pretend that pillows are rockets and chairs the moon. As I tell my students, our imagination is so powerful a tool that we could just as easily pretend to go to the forest or the market or the sea, should we wish. Imagination is not an act of lying or self-deceit; in fact, to use it is to be conscious of its pretend nature. As such, creative drama is not presenting play as fiction, nor is it letting the imagination run wild. Rather, a successful creative drama fosters a space where the process of imagining can occur.

By my interviewees' collective account, creative drama is a hallmark of early childhood theatre classrooms; every teaching artist I interviewed indicated they use similar activities of "make-believe" with young students, describing examples like interactive storytelling, tableaux, process drama, and being "in role." (Grace, notably, describes of her early childhood curriculum that it's all "creative-based play learning.") Given the intensity of cognitive growth in early childhood, the prevalence of such exercises is understandable. They cultivate not only one's ability to use their imagination but also their own awareness of it—metacognition situated in a creative skill. *Your imagination is a tool at your disposal; look what you can do with it!* But

[45] Gopnik and Astington, "Children's Understanding of Representational Change," 28.

these activities, like my own space flight drama, also highlight the knowledge construction situated within the imagination, itself a way of learning. *Our imaginations are sites of learning; look what we can discover through it!* And it's within this "back-and-forth," imagination as both a skill and a means, that I direct my curiosity. If the previous chapter presented the overlapping definitions of teaching artistry, early childhood, and imagination, then I write this chapter to build on their intersection and to examine more concretely the relationship between the imagination and one's teaching—that is to say, no longer *what* is teaching artistry and the imagination, but rather, *how* does the early childhood teaching artist teach imaginatively, creatively, artfully?

I call this approach "imaginative teaching," a pedagogy that by name alone indicates what it holds central to the process of teaching and learning. We can trace initial studies of imagination's role in educational experiences to philosopher John Dewey, who theorized on the true nature of the imagination in *Art as Experience*; he writes of it as "the large and generous blending of interests at the point where the mind comes in contact with the world."[46] Arts educator and scholar Elliot Eisner builds on the work of Dewey to link imagination and education in his text *The Arts and The Creation of Mind*. Eisner argues that use of imagination prompts complex thinking and that to *engage* the imagination is critical to "artful" teaching, ultimately proposing that is "the teacher's task to design environments that promote educational development of the young."[47] He later relates the idea of the educator as imagination's facilitator to the concept of image-based pedagogy, or the sharing of knowledge (teaching) through mental images. In his article "Images at the Core of Education," Eisner speaks of the "image" in

[46] Dewey, *Art as Experience,* 278. See Davide (2015) for more explicit connections drawn between Dewey's idea of experiential learning and theories of the imagination.
[47] Eisner, *The Arts and The Creation of Mind*, 234.

education, but he is careful to disassociate the image with only sight. As he writes: "Images can be formed in any sensory modality. We tend to think about images as being visual, but images can also be auditory. They can be tactile. They can be olfactory. In fact, images can take shape in any sensory modality that operates in an individual."[48] His clarification extends image-based pedagogy beyond its most obvious connection to the visual arts, characteristic of his long-held belief that aesthetic educational experiences are not under the jurisdiction of the arts alone—there are images in every discipline, even if they are the most obvious in the arts. For Eisner, imaginative teaching is a matter of offering experiences in which images can be formed, melded, and represented across intellectual domains.

Kieran Egan, another pioneer of imaginative education, believes that the imagination is the foundation to teaching and learning; to ignore the imagination is to fail students of their own educative potential, to leave them "impoverished."[49] Imagination cannot be an addition or an alternative because it itself is a fundamental skill to learning, an ability by use of we can construct and communicate meaning. In his book *An Imaginative Approach to Teaching,* Egan outlines "principles of imaginative engagement" in classrooms, all of which are geared toward equipping students with the creative skills to make sense of the world and their own experience.[50] Though self-admittedly bold in his claims, his theory reflects the critical role of a teacher in building one's imaginative capabilities. He notes: "The soul of teaching is… to enlarge, enrich, and make more abundant the experience of children. And crucial to this is engaging their imaginations in the world around them."[51] For Egan, imaginative teaching is a

[48] Eisner, "Images at the core," 30-31.
[49] Nadaner and Egan, *Imagination and Education*, ix.
[50] Egan, *An Imaginative Approach*, 210.
[51] Ibid., 212.

pedagogy focused on the acquisition of understanding that enables individual and collective meaning-making.

Meanwhile, my own introduction to the possibilities of imaginative teaching was through the writing of philosopher Maxine Greene, who is known best for her repeated assertion that the arts are foundational to learning.[52] Greene writes of the imagination as a "passion for possibility" and suggests that it is the responsibility of an educator to "release" or "awaken" our ability to use it. She does not claim that we are unable to use our imaginations without the guidance of another, but rather, that a teacher is in the unique power to direct our attention to our imaginations and the power they hold. By encouraging use of the imagination, an educator can promote it as a way of understanding an experience other than our own: "To release the imagination too is to release the power of empathy, to become more present to those around, perhaps to care."[53] For Greene, then, imaginative teaching is both an application and evoking of the imagination as a lens through which to observe the world and the people within.

Across all of their interpretations, Eisner, Egan, and Greene share in the belief that use of the imagination is a way of constructing meaning, the integration of what one observes with what knowledge they already know. Egan goes so far as to argue that our *ability* to imagine is "a prerequisite to making any activity educational."[54] In other words, we are able to learn because our imaginations allow us to respond, create, and represent our own understanding. The early childhood educator in me is quick to draw connections between this fundamental skill and the development of young children, a relationship I'm not alone in noting. Eisner describes

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[52] Weber, "Maxine Greene."
[53] Greene, "Imagination and the Healing Arts," 4.
[54] Nadaner and Egan, ix.

imagination as "a source of exploratory delight" for preschoolers, their play a vivid exhibit of imaginative abilities. Writing of early childhood, he notes:

> It is during this period that children take special pleasure in the sheer exploration of the sensory potential of the materials they use. It is at this time that their imaginative abilities, uninhibited by the constraints of culture, make it possible for them to convert a stick of wood into a plane they can fly, a sock into a doll they can cuddle, or an array of lines drawn so they stand for daddy… And it is these inclinations toward satisfaction and exploration that enlightened educators and parents wish to sustain.[55]

Eisner need not proclaim that imaginative teaching is effective teaching in early childhood because he notes that it is already how children at this age learn. Duffy, again in her book *Supporting Creativity and Imagination*, agrees, even more direct in linking imaginative education to early childhood. She describes the techniques of "creative teaching" as they relate only to work with young children: "Creative teaching is an art. It involves the practitioner in using their own imagination to make learning more interesting, exciting and effective; taking risks; leaving the security of structured lessons behind; [and] learning from the children. Teaching for creativity involves ways of teaching that develop young children's own creative thinking and behavior. Creative learning is about children taking control of the creative process and owning it."[56] And so, for Duffy, this approach to teaching is in itself a creative act. It is flexible and participatory, engaging and multi-modal, oriented toward students' contributions and allows for shared experimentation.

What Duffy describes as "creative teaching"—or what I name, again, as "imaginative teaching"—is the work of an early childhood teaching artist. In facilitating art-making with young learners, a teaching artist seeks to build a child's creative skills; to engage in reciprocal learning, and to provide an opportunity where the child's own meaning can be developed and

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[55] Eisner, *The Arts and The Creation of Mind*, 4-5.
[56] Duffy, 121.

shared. While Greene is intentional about using “teaching artist” in her writing on the imagination and her philosophical perspectives has trained many a teaching artist under the name of “aesthetic education,”[57] rare remains the documented account from theatre teaching artists themselves about the use of imagination in the classroom. How do they understand imagination in their own teaching? An echo of Spolin’s discovery that the impulse to play exists within everyone decades earlier, Matt locates her own pedagogy within the imaginative play young learners naturally engage in. Sharing with me what draws her to early childhood, she remarks: “Just the sense of play and being able to play like my own inner child… [Students’] minds are like sponges, so I'm learning from them, but they're learning from me, and it's just this inherent shared knowledge being passed back and forth all through play. That's how we're learning.” Matt’s teaching is imaginative because both she and her students share and acquire knowledge through use of their imagination in play; her pedagogy originates in her acknowledgment that “imagining” is a way of knowing.

Stephanie has made similar connections between her students’ learning and her methods of facilitation. Like the majority of those who I interviewed, Stephanie does not work exclusively with young children as a teaching artist. However, when I ask her what distinguishes early childhood for her, she’s quick to respond that “kindergartners and first graders, they're just wholeheartedly excited and want to bring their ideas to the space and they don't care how ridiculous it is.” Like Matt, she respond to students’ willingness to play through her teaching, expressing her own excitement over “watching the elevation of learning that can happen in a preschool classroom when you are giving scenarios and… [asking] questions.” Stephanie’s observation of her students’ learning returns to the doubled nature of imagination in the

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[57] Hill Bose, “Aesthetic Education,” iv.

classroom. Evoking students' sense of wonder, they learn to imagine; building skills through creative play, they imagine to learn.

My focus on early childhood, however, should not be taken as an implication that imaginative teaching is limited to young learners. To the contrary, I believe—like Eisner, Egan, Greene, and other advocates of the imagination in education—that we can and do continue to learn by engaging our imaginations throughout our lives. Isabella agrees, explaining that while imagination may be the center of early childhood pedagogy, it's how we all happen to learn: " Young children learn through play. I think engaging our imagination for early learners is super important, but it's also something that translates to older kids as well. Engaging our imagination gives us a way into learning. It's why we watch movies or read books, it's to enter an imaginary world, where we might learn about our emotions or helping others, but using our imagination makes it more engaging. And it gives us space to imagine new possibilities." Isabella equates imagination and play, and, like Matt, sees them both as processes of learning. And if the imagination is "a way into learning," then it is the job of the teaching artist to engage it or, to quote Greene, to "awaken" it, regardless of a student's age or artistic medium. Helen too notes that teaching and learning by the imagination are not age-dependent. Inspired by a recent experience using a theatre movement exercise with her colleagues, she describes:

> I think it's fun for everyone to use their imagination and to put that lens on everything. We do that in early childhood cause that's the only way to get anything done, because you can't say to a three-year-old, like, "Take deep breaths," but if it's within an activity that is based in play or storytelling, then you can do that. But I think anyone would think that's fun. And when you add that creative imaginative element, things happen in your brain. You're using more parts of your brain compared to if you're just doing that movement activity without added imaginative elements.

Imaginative teaching can and should be employed at any age. But what we find in early childhood, as Helen remarks, is a necessary use of this approach; to repeat, imaginative teaching is "the only way to get anything done" among young learners.

To teach imaginatively is to probe at what is known and what is not, to foster creative thinking, to consider what is possible if we dare to suspend our disbelief. I call it "imaginative teaching," but I too could describe it as early childhood teaching artistry as they are one and the same. The early childhood teaching artist, put simply, is always teaching imaginatively.

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A conversation on a particular philosophy of teaching, of course, lends itself to questions about technique. One of my favorite inquiries that I asked of teaching artists was "What is a typical day in your classroom?" because it generated an array of responses and, broadly speaking, equipped me with a rich understanding of how imagination can manifest in the classroom. And it's within and through these teaching artists' explanations of their everyday curriculums that I find the dual pedagogical nature of the imagination made clear. Take Autumn, who facilitates "interactive storytelling" with her pre-K students, a process of "building the world through embodiment and through their ideas and also visuals." She describes in more detail what this activity entails:

> I do think images and video are helpful in putting up a story in a world, but I really love interactive storytelling. So it's like, "Once upon a time there was a huge forest. Can everyone show me the trees with your arms? There were birds. Show me what birds look like. What sound do birds make?" And then I'll be like, "What other animals were there?" Then they offer their ideas… "What other sounds were there? What did you smell? Let's all walk through the forest." And we walk together. So when I say interactive storytelling, I'm using the ideas and we're all repeating their ideas to get there.

Just as I invited students to fly in their rockets at the beginning of this chapter, Autumn creates a space in which students can travel to the forest (and their imaginations can flourish) by

respecting and reacting to the ideas raised by their peers. Moreover, she prompts them to engage in sensory image-making by creation (*thinking* of what sounds a bird makes or what you might smell in a forest) and representation (*showing* how a bird moves or sings). Through both acts, students learn about the world of the story and the agency they have to shape it.

Autumn has done interactive storytelling in person, but here, she reflects on her style of online teaching, describing interactive storytelling as she's facilitated it over Zoom. I cannot ignore the virtual circumstances under which I met with teaching artists and they spoke of their work—but nor do I wish to. The "virtual classroom" offers a new space in which to witness the imagination in the practice of teaching and learning, and so in an exploration of imaginative teaching, I'm also compelled to ask: what is it through a screen? How do our imaginations manifest in the virtual classroom, and how does that impact the work of a teaching artist? While sensory experiences can spark the imagination, use of it alone doesn't require physical sensory input; what we imagine is derived from our minds. (That is, to reiterate Eisner, the very idea of the "image," the metaphorical representation of a sensory experience.) And so if there is any pedagogy best suited to adapt to the loss of physical space as demanded by the pandemic, it is teaching that is in itself based in mental meaning-making. Imaginative exercises, like those based in play and theatre, can be facilitated so long as people are gathered in some way, existing within the same off-line environment not required. Even the idea of a teaching artist's virtual classroom complicates the traditionally-held notion of theatre as an art of the physical sense, performers and audience existing within the same boundaries of space at the same time. Under the restrictions of COVID-19, space is defined differently, but digital gathering can still support the performance and creativity of participatory theatre-making.

I present this thinking not to suggest that virtual teaching artistry is noticeably distinguishable from in-person instruction, but rather, to consider the opposite: that with the obvious difference of space aside, these two sites of teaching and learning share much overlap. On this point, Sienna adds: "Especially with the younger kids, we're doing a lot of the same skill building and skill sets that I would be doing. So making a tableau, you know, or some sort of process drama. That's all the same… it just looks a little different because you're doing it there and I'm doing it here, but we're still doing it together." Sienna points out that the exercises—and more importantly, the motivation behind each exercise—are no different than what a teaching artist plans in person. This was true across interviews: the activities that teaching artists have adapted for online are fundamentally no different than those of in-person instruction, save for the slight modifications that an online platform requires. But like a prism refracting light, through the virtual classroom, we see teaching artistry and yet it is early childhood teaching artistry, transformed as a showcase of what it holds central. In the absence of shared space (or to *fill* the gap of physical space), teaching artists have no option but to use the imagination to enable play. Here, I think of Helen, who reflected on her approach to online instruction as one of "modality": "But [children are] in their own space and all these other things, so why should they look at this little thing right in front of them? So it is again modality—using all the different modalities and all the different senses and the different art forms to access all parts of them. It's always important in that age group, but I think even more so online."

If we understand the imagination as constructing in the mind what the senses cannot physically perceive, then Helen is right to fixate on the digital form of modality, as the creation of the mental "image" is in itself an internal representation of a sensory experience. Online and off, teaching artists can prompt image-making—and, henceforth, the imagination—by offering a

sensory "spark," e.g. a sound to recall a location or an image from which you construct your own role or narrative. We might call the senses the palette from which our imaginations take shape. However, in the virtual classroom, not all five senses can be controlled for, and so imagination develops only from the modalities for which a computer screen allows. Matt, for examples, employs sound to engage our aural sense and elicit creative responses from her students, as she explains: "[What] has been really helpful [is] creating sound or getting sound from YouTube… I've been able to create the setting of where their story is taking place." She provides the auditory material from which her students can *imagine* the place it evokes. Olivia incorporates visual images into her lessons for the same reason. She shares a moment from her classroom when she was discussing the setting of the class' story: "I can show them pictures of Scotland and be like, what do you notice about this place? If you were going to be an object in Scotland, what object would you be? Like a castle or a tree or something like that. So being able to still have that visual connection has been really great with them." Here again, the provided imagine provokes a mental one.

Online, early childhood theatre teaching artists spark image-making by what one can see and hear because digital platforms offer only one mode of connection, and that is through the screen. The imagination, meanwhile, offers a means of building off of whatever the device displays. And so, imagination adds to itself: it's a matter of practicality, the only tool guaranteed across environments. From Ryan's experience, imagination is the basis of his requests that involve physical objects because the space off of a student's screen is unknown. He recalls: "Sometimes I'll say, 'Okay, so we're gonna show me how this character moved,' or, you know, 'Grab your grab your sword and shield! We're gonna fight the dragon!' And then there will be times where I'll say, 'Okay, find something.' Because I can't provide materials to any of these

kids. And I can't assume that they have anything.” What Ryan doesn’t mention but implies is that it doesn’t matter what item students return with, if they arrive with an object at all; their imaginations already do the work of providing a way of entry into the pretend world.

Thus the virtual classroom limits the senses, but the imagination enables play to continue; it is our way of dreaming up what we cannot find on screen. Ultimately, and in agreement with others, Autumn discovered that what was “most effective virtually” were exercises that required one’s imagination to succeed:

> The process dramas, which you would think would be the hardest to facilitate, [were] actually the most effective because there's a character. They want to communicate with it. It gives them a stake through the screen. There’s a lot of opportunity to put things through the screen… I would often get into role as something and they would talk to me. That was where things were most effective virtually. And I would use images sometimes. Like if we have to get to a cave [in our story] and we have to move through the flowers and the water, I’ll show a flower field and be like, “How do we get through?”

A creative drama builds the imagination as it uses the imagination; like a muscle, one’s imagination is strengthened by use. And so online, we see the critical crux of imaginative teaching laid bare: here again, students *learn to imagine* and *imagine to learn*.

We might call virtual imaginative teaching as teaching artistry at its simplest, or, as Ryan describes, the “very minimal”: “So the teaching style now is very minimal. Which is okay! But it does make me realize [that] I was relying on things to energize the class and have people stay engaged. And I miss it, but I don't need it.” The “things” Ryan references are the material objects that digital teaching, by necessity, rids itself of. The intention of teaching artists is no different, but, again, it’s the stakes that have shifted. What the virtual classroom reveals is how crucial the imagination is to the theatre teaching artist, because without shared physical space, they rely on imagination alone.

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Ryan misses the materiality of in-person instruction, but many others expressed missing the level of engagement one can "feel" in shared physical space. For the teaching artists who created pre-recorded lessons, the lack of response is compounded by the very absence of students at all. Matt noted the strangeness of teaching to an unseen class ("It was pre-recorded [and] it was just very bizarre"), as did Olivia: "I was teaching it by recording myself, which was super awkward. I hated it. Like pausing for two minutes waiting for them to fill." Sienna strayed from pre-recorded material entirely, noting that "just doing it to a blank screen just felt bad to [her.]" Even still, synchronous virtual teaching is not a perfect site of feedback either; I recall one colleague who confided that teaching early childhood online often feels like running your own children's show, for you instruct without the immediate and audible feedback you're granted in-person. For Ryan, too, judging engagement is "a lot harder to do now that [students are] not physically in the room with you, but you have [just] a little block to look at." It is not pessimistic but merely true to say that the virtual classroom flattens participation to a square on the screen.

While I focused my investigation on synchronous online teaching, I recognize that the challenge of engagement faces all teaching artists, regardless of the mode through which they facilitate. Teaching itself is a reciprocal process between educator and learner, and so I see engagement—the curiosity, interest, and investment that students have in their own learning—as central to teaching artistry. Without student engagement, the art-making nor the creative skill-building doesn't matter. Isabella relates the success of devising to students' investment: "The young people have to invest in the world. The engagement comes before learning. In creating an imaginary world, they have to care about the world and the characters they are meeting. If they don't care, if they don't buy-in, then nothing happens." The ability of an artistic experience or a

playful one to provoke a student's imagination and creativity only goes so far as their interest in the making itself.

But just as the virtual classroom generates a new understanding of the roles of participant and facilitator, so too does it challenge our impressions and measures of student engagement. Online, we see early childhood play mediated through the digital medium by guided interaction and idea-building. It is not much different from the instruction that occurs in-person, but if it *feels* more directed, it's because imaginative prompts are all that the teaching artist is able to facilitate. Olivia reflects on this distinction as she recounts a recent lesson:

> I feel like now obviously it's a lot more directed—like you can't quite let kids go as free as they normally would because you lose them or it just doesn't work. You can't be like, "Everybody let's pretend we're at the circus! Go!" They're just confused. So I find [that] I'm just more specifically telling them, "Okay, we just read this book about lions. If you were going to be [a lion]… A lesson I just did this past Saturday was like, "We're going to go on a jungle adventure, so everybody hop into my Jeep. We're going to go spy jungle animals all around the safari!" And you get it started and have them spy different ones and spot them out and then we'll turn into those animals. "Everybody be a giraffe!" Or, I don't know, "Celia suggested we be like a zebra. Let's try being a zebra!" And they get really excited about that.

It's common for early childhood educators to create the boundaries of the "imagined world," but the virtual classroom heightens the need for such specific direction—or risk losing students' engagement. Matt provides a similar memory:

> So like most recently for this lesson, I had the sound of the pond [as] if you're visiting a pond. It's a whole process of being really specific. I've been having to be really specific on what imaginary things I'm trying to explain. Obviously you have to do that when you're in the classroom, but when you're remote like this… Like, "Alright, we're getting in the boat right now. What's the color of your boat? How big is your boat? Great. Do we need a life jacket? Put on your life jacket. Great." And then I'll cue the sound of the pond and bugs and water and ask, "Alright, what do you hear? Oh, we're going to row to the pond." So being able to play in this space, but also use technology as a way for us to really get into the story that we're [creating].

Perhaps this specificity dilutes the purity of children's imagination. But I believe otherwise: teaching artists' use of "directed" imagination in virtual settings allows young learners to create and play as an ensemble even when separate from one another.

In fact, to do the converse contributes to the misconception that the teaching artist exists only as supervisor or witness to children's imaginations. Duffy explores the distinction between interventionist and non-interventionist roles, noting that it is the role of an adult to "create conditions within which children are inspired to be creative and imaginative."[58] In this conversation, I also return to Eisner, who warns of a "pedagogy of neglect": "Some believe that by getting out of the child's way, by providing the child with opportunities to explore on his or her own, the child's innovative capacities are more likely to be released and the consequences are likely to be substantially educational as a result. The view of the teacher's role, a kind of pedagogy by neglect, assumes that intelligent teaching is unlikely… I would argue that an unassisted course of maturation is morally irresponsible; the teacher's task is to design environments that promote the educational development of the young."[59]

Virtually, a pedagogy of neglect leaves young learners, quite literally, in their own world. Ryan observed of activities that didn't engage the full ensemble of students or lacked specificity that "it would go on to the next person and that lets everybody else go like, 'This doesn't matter until it's my turn.'" Autumn has also reflected on the consequences of the screen and her resulting role as a teaching artist:

> Zoom has impacted my thinking about really ensuring that each individual can express themselves as opposed to being like, "What could this be?" and then only a few people respond. In drama class, not everyone will be able to literally say an idea, and I don't think they need to. But I think giving everyone an in while doing the work is important, even when you're apart. Because if you're all together and a few people are more engaged than others, you're still all together, so collectively you're experiencing something. If

[58] Duffy, 122.
[59] Eisner, *The Arts and The Creation of Mind*, 322.

someone isn't able to engage for whatever reason and they're behind a screen, how can I still give them an in?

Grace hypothesizes that with specific direction on the part of the teaching artist (the “in” that Autumn seeks), students are more likely to engage at a rate even higher than that of an in-person class: “When you're in a [physical] room and you have the full 360 to engage with, maybe it's easier to be distracted by that full 360. But online, if you're looking at one place and I'm controlling what you see, which is like what you're seeing right now, maybe it's easier to focus on just that one thing.” I do not wish to disavow completely the value of imagining unprompted and the learning that results, but we would be wrong to think that an educator plays no role in the growth of a child’s creativity. Using an art form like theatre, teaching artists already rise to the task of designing such environments with attention to students’ imagination. We witness this in person, but we see this responsibility with even greater clarity online: teaching artists facilitate theatre-making and creative skill-building in equal turn.

The virtual classroom also provides clarity for teaching artists as they reflect on their pedagogy, the space once again a way of observing the foundation of early childhood teaching artistry. As Stephanie explains: “One of the things that has happened through Zoom is that all expectations are out the window because it's a pandemic and we're on a computer screen. You get to go back to the core of what is theater education, which is play. And so I what I'm going to try to do is to make sure that I allow myself to always center play.” If we teach towards the imagination (play) and through the imagination (play), as Stephanie has prioritized, it follows that imagination is practically a way of being in the classroom. And though the imagination is adaptable, it itself is a constant amidst the variable of circumstances facing educators and learners alike, online and off.

In closing, this chapter concretizes not only what is to teach imaginatively but also what it is to teach imaginatively online. What we find in the virtual classroom is the “core” of teaching artistry: imagination by way of the senses, imagination as used by an ensemble, and imagination as the tool for learning. Continuing her reflection on the use of imagination and play, Stephanie makes a statement that could be the philosophy of all teaching artists: “It’s just a cathartic experience to be able to use your imagination, to play and to think of other worlds and dimensions and ideas. And so I think it's incredibly important to be used in the classroom.” To that, I have nothing more to say than: yes, I agree.

3.

Joy and A Space to Be

> *I think I've been surprised—strangely—at how much joy I find in spending time in these classes! While I've expressed excitement over the internship since signing on, it's been paired with a fair dose of skepticism that this could actually work (no doubt caused by my own frustrations with virtual learning as a college junior).*
>
> *That said, I've yet to leave one of these courses without a smile on my face, as they remind me in equal turn that theatre is simply a form of expression and storytelling, your "stage" whatever you'd like. The opportunity to connect and create in a time of such uncertainty is one I don't take for granted, and I hope that students and families realize what a pivotal part they play in this process!*[60]

My summer of teaching at Children's Theatre Company is documented by short journal entries like this, a record that now sits on my desktop of my reactions to teaching on and through a digital medium. I'll be the first to admit that I was doubtful at the summer's start that Zoom could provide the same "magic" that teaching artists cultivate in classrooms and rehearsal rooms. I jotted down this particular note midway through July 2020 when I had several courses under my belt: a class that explored how we build and play characters, a creative movement class where we told stories through dance, a playwriting class with weekly workshops to share "worlds-in-progress." Through them all, I could see well the joy that thinking imaginatively can bring. I credit my students and my colleagues for proving my initial fears wrong—and, frankly, I should have known better from the beginning. I have always found connection and meaning in theatrical spaces. Why would theatre-remaking on Zoom be any different?

Thinking more philosophically, I also ask: why make theatre, online and off, in this educational, "applied" way at all? I close here with a chapter to answer questions that branch off

[60] Journal by author, July 2020.

of an even simpler one: why? If we understand what teaching artistry and the imagination are (as I explore in Chapter One) and how the imagination is used in one's teaching (as presented in Chapter Two), we might be led to wonder: why teach imaginatively? Why value imaginative education?

The undercurrent to these questions is yet another: why does one choose to be a teaching artist? I can speak for myself. I often joke that it is my life's work to convince others that arts-based education is important, that to think otherwise is to grossly underestimate the impact of creativity and imagination on our ability to make sense of the world. We do ourselves a disservice if we consider the arts as fundamentally unnecessary to educational experiences because they are a means of accessing creativity, imagination, and emotion, skills that equip the self for a vibrant and meaningful experience of life. Pistrak, quoted in Vygotsky, makes a similar claim—that is, an "artistic education" is essentially learning how to make meaning of our lives:

> It is not so much that artistic education provides knowledge or skills, but rather it gives a tone to life or, perhaps, it would be more accurate to say—a background for living. The convictions that we may inculcate in school through knowledge, only grow roots in the child's psyche when these convictions are reinforced emotionally. You cannot be a dedicated fighter if at the moment of battle your mind is not filled with clear, strong, and vivid pictures that inspire you to fight; you cannot struggle against the old ways, if you have no hatred of them and the ability to hate is an emotion. You cannot build the new with enthusiasm if you are unable to love the new with enthusiasm, and, after all, enthusiasm develops as the result of the right kind of artistic education.[61]

The stronger our imagination, the better we can "struggle against the old ways" and "build the new"; our emotional literacy is likewise fortified by imaginative experiences. Connecting Pistrak's work to that of more contemporary theorists explored previously (e.g. Eisner, Egan, Greene), I'd argue that arts-based education is imaginative teaching applied; whatever the artistic medium, it is the setting for learning through the imagination. In the position of a teaching artist,

[61] Vygotsky, "Imagination and Creativity in Childhood," 55.

I find an opportunity to promote art as an entry point into the imagination, and so, I choose to *be* a teaching artist because I am excited by what the imagination can do and look to wield its power for good.

I approach teaching artistry as a meaningful form of my own advocacy, but I find company in other teaching artists, for whom the notion of the teaching artist as "advocate" is not far off from their own definitions. Matt, for example, is markedly vocal in her awareness of a teaching artist's ability to enact change: "A teaching artist is a person that is both skilled as an educator and artist, a person that has a role in building their community's arts sector and actively exploring how to use their art form to dismantle systemic issues within their community." By Matt's definition, a teaching artist is embedded in their community and oriented toward social change; their tool of choice is art of all mediums, and so they also utilize imagination and creativity. For Matt, being a teaching artist is her effort at building a better community (and world), meaningful in its potential to create change. Stephanie also notes the impact of teaching artistry. Here, she describes the relationship between her teaching and work towards broader equity: "Being a teaching artist means I am going through a process of unlearning and relearning. Theatre, and our country in general, needs to do the work to create a more inclusive and equitable community. I am going through the process of developing my own anti-racist ethos. So I'm also trying to find ways to bring joy and support healing and, at the very least, do no harm in my teaching." Like Matt, Stephanie sees her role as someone actively working within a community, but moreover, she recognizes the teaching artist as a position of influence. She is a teaching artist because she is interested in building community through theatre (at one point in our conversation, she named community-building as exactly "what [she wants] to do"), but she

derives *meaning* from her work because the creation of a more "inclusive and equitable community" is in itself a significant responsibility.

When we look specifically at early childhood theatre teaching artists, we find educators who are responsible for fostering and bolstering connections among learners still in the process of constructing their foundational knowledge of the world. Therefore, the teaching artist's influence comes in the form of supporting what is innate to a child; they create a space where students are empowered to imagine new possibilities for themselves. Helen connects her interest in theatre made by (or for) children to "interactive" art of this same nature, where the distinction of audience and artist is blurred and possibilities can emerge. She explains: "[Early childhood] theatre is very multisensory and interactive. And that is the type of theatre that I'm interested in: interactive and original theatre that's made by a group of people ideally inspired by the ideas of their community." Helen, like many a teaching artist, runs with the ideas her students provide. She later elaborates that she was drawn to teaching artistry because she finds the creative, "active" approach beneficial: "I want to engage with things in an active way [because] that's how you form ideas… and that's the best way to make meaning." From her response we can extrapolate for early childhood teaching artists, interest and purpose will often intertwine. Teaching artists instruct in early childhood because the creativity that occurs at this age excites them; they also teach early childhood because they believe that their work in art, play, and imagination offer something of importance to children.

The early childhood teaching artist thus sees art-making as not only a creative practice but also an opportunity for growth and learning, and it is in the combination of these qualities that these educators find purpose. Schonmann fears that the modern applied-theatre practitioner, a position under which teaching artists fall, has grown to focus so much on what theatre *provides*

that they become what is essentially a social worker or communication therapist, cut off from their "artistic-aesthetic roots."[62] The teaching artists I interviewed, however, see no such contradiction. They celebrate the stories that children create with their imagination as artistic works while also recognizing that the act of storytelling results in skills that go beyond art-making, like creativity and empathy; one does not happen without the other. Similarly, they identify as practicing artists but teaching artistry comes at no cost to the art they produce; they see teaching as a *part* of their artistic practice. Here, I return to the words of Eric Booth, who argues that teaching artists can and do "[redefine] what the arts can be."[63]

And in the virtual classroom, the learning environment spurred by the pandemic, teaching artists have a lens through which they can reflect anew on the value of their work. Why be a teaching artist? Online, it is a question to which we can respond with even greater clarity. Grace, for example, derives personal meaning from what she is able to virtually provide students in a prolonged period of social distancing: "It means even more to me than I thought it would initially—due to the pandemic, students of all ages (but especially preschoolers) are experiencing significant changes to the ways in which they develop social/emotional/communicative skills. Even if the vehicle isn't perfect, creating and maintaining a space where children can see and interact with one another feels like a vital task." Teaching artists always create a space where children can see, interact, and imagine as a group; that is the work of making theatre together. But online, absent of the support of in-person interaction and compounded by the upheaval of COVID-19, teaching artistry holds a certain novel quality. In the "newness" of their online instruction, teaching artists are reminded of the necessity of this "vital task." That is to say, *the virtual classroom renews their purpose.* Ryan elaborates on this idea in the process of defining

[62] Schonmann, 35.
[63] Booth, "What is a Teaching Artist?"

his role as a teaching artist. He tells me: “I’ve come to appreciate my actual role as a teaching artist, which is to inspire, not bestow. Ultimately, I don't choose whether a child listens to me or not. That's on them. All I can do is provide an environment that they want to be in and while they're with me, they can learn things that will help them in the long run, such as how to express their thoughts or how to create their own fun play environments.” Indicated by his description of these skills as those that help “in the long run,” Ryan knows that creative experiences can equip students with life-long skills. His revelation from online teaching, however, is a clarified understanding of what the teaching artist can do. In the virtual classroom, he continues to drive and support the creation of spaces where students can escape, process, and make their own meaning. To echo Grace, the vehicle is new, different, may not be “perfect,” but teaching artistry remains meaningful and beneficial work.

And what of the imagination? While the teaching artist provides the time and space for use of the imagination, the imagination itself is a way of processing what one experiences. Through imaginative play, a child can re-create what they’ve seen and heard and apply their own understanding. As Vygotsky explains, when one imagines, “there is always a perception of the external and internal, which is the basis of our experience,” that a child then transforms by a process of active re-construction.[64] This process involves the conditions of disassociation (breaking a whole into smaller parts so a child can change or modify their initial impression), followed by association (connecting elements not previously or traditionally associated together). What results is an internal “construction of a complex picture” that we communicate via an external image or product. Take an example from Autumn’s classroom, where her students imagined that a dragon had burned down their castle and was mean only because he was hurt that

[64] Vygotsky, “Imagination and Creativity in Childhood,” 25.

other dragons didn't like his claws. Collectively, the children broke down what they knew of both acting "badly" and mythical creatures and associated these pieces of knowledge with one another to create a unique backstory for the dragon. Autumn provided the boundaries of their storytelling, but, as she tells me, it was the students who "created [the] ending by exploring with their imaginations the [character of the] dragon."

Children are therefore driven to imagine by a change or gap in their experience; they use the imagination to create what their environment cannot provide (e.g. Autumn provided no reason for the dragon's being "mean"). Vygotsky describes this motivation as "lack of adaptation"—when an individual is not in equilibrium with the world around them—which "gives rise to needs, motives, and desires" that the only the imagination can fulfill.[65] I'd extend this explanation: we use the imagination in periods that deviate from the "norm" as a means of securing control. The imagination allows us to perceive as we so wish. Isabella believes that for her students, "[class] was a nice escape from what was happening." She elaborates that "because everything else was so stressful, with some of their families losing their jobs and just a lot of other things, this was a space where they could not have to think about that for an hour and a half." Isabella's students are not escaping or dreaming into sheer fantasy, separating themselves from the world, because their imagining is a conscious act. Instead, they play in a space where the limitations of their lives are temporarily waived; the imagination's only boundary is what one has previously perceived. The pretend world, in turn, is a place of processing what occurs in reality.

The virtual classroom is thus a reminder of what can be easily forgotten in the teaching artist's tradition of shared physical space and in-person instruction: that the imagination is a

[65] Vygotsky, "Imagination and Creativity in Childhood," 29.

powerful tool in life, a means of processing experiences good and bad, expected or not. In other words, the *novelty* of teaching artistry in a digital learning environment reaffirms the idea of imagination as a skill always at one's disposal. Helen responds to my question of "What does your virtual theatre classroom provide students?" by noting imagination's prevalence in a shifting world: "I mean the things that it always offers but in an even more heightened way in that it offers a way to process the world. Which [children] do, even if we're there or not—they're going to process it through play. So it just gives more opportunities to process the world through play and to express emotions and ideas through the arts and [offers] additional language for expression." During COVID-19, the potential for the imagination has been heightened because reality off the screen—the "real world"—has shifted into an uncertain future.

Against the backdrop of the pandemic, the teaching artist's (reaffirmed) purpose coincides with the benefits of using one's imagination when faced with something "new," especially in early childhood. Teaching artists use the imagination as the basis of their pedagogy; we could all use the imagination to process a new experience. Grace speaks to these corresponding ideas as she, too, considers what virtual instruction offers young learners: "I always just come back to theater is a tool for teaching empathy… Because I do think about the long-term effects of being that young at a time where a lot of us would be entering in-person classrooms. How to interact in group settings and be a "citizen" or part of a community is what kids start learning at this age and they're not getting that in ways that we have done in the past. So what are we doing to help simulate that right now? And I think that's what we're doing." To Grace's point, imaginative experiences grant us not only control of our own perceptions but also a means of understanding another. Stephanie bookends her classes with exercises that demonstrate this range of the imagination, but particularly in response to students' needs: "I

always try to be like something sad starts, but then we're going to always end on something joyful." She thinks that "kids need a space to talk about missing school or missing [their] friends," two of many constants that have shifted in young learners' lives because of COVID-19.

There are countless examples of the real utility of the imagination in students' daily lives as realized through teaching artistry. It matters not so much what they imagine, but more so that they have the opportunity to play pretend, as use of the imagination already derives from what one knows and needs. Noting from her own classroom, Matt shares that her prompts to respond imaginatively creates space for students to engage and process as they would like: "[Students are] like, 'I miss my friends, I miss seeing everybody, I miss seeing you,' and are processing all of these thoughts… I always start our class with 'How are we feeling today? How are we? Can you show me in your body what that looks like?' Even if they don't want to respond [verbally], they're just showing me. I think it's really important. Because we're, even after this all ends, in a very different world." The benefits of children's imagining are accentuated in the pandemic's new and "very different world." A teaching artist might reflect on what their students gain, as Grace does: "Can we know over Zoom that our classmates are watching us and are engaging with us and are noting that what we do is important and has meaning in our class and in the world?", but the question itself is redundant: the virtual classroom makes the need for creative spaces all the more apparent because they gift teaching artists a reminder of how the imagination supports the crucial act of meaning-meaning.

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The challenge often facing early childhood teaching artists, as I expressed at the beginning of this chapter, is maintaining the value of their work in a society that regularly overlooks what it makes possible. While these teaching artists personally find meaning and

purpose in their work and it's clear that imagination is something children need, the potential for their impact crosses a conflation of dismissals: of early childhood, of imaginative teaching and learning, of the arts at large. Early childhood education, for instance, is deemed important but easy—as in *easy to do*. From her research of UK early years settings, Bradbury concludes that early childhood education, which emphasizes play and creative skill-building, loses "[its] legitimacy in a results-driven culture."[66] This is a culture that the United States shares; without the quantitative assessment that dominates later grades, early childhood education can be glossed over as mere "arts and crafts." Working as a preschool teacher and researcher simultaneously, Dana Frantz Bentley notes the assumed ease of early childhood education that is implied when she is frequently asked: "Why would you want to *just* teach preschool?"[67] Likewise, Egan finds that imagination is often deemed "peripheral" to real learning,[68] whereas Duffy describes a cultural tendency to "undervalue creative and imaginative ways of thinking" in education systems.[69] While children's imagination is regarded as an important quality for their cognitive development and later success,[70] that it is routinely re-introduced as new pedagogical thought, as Eckhoff and Urbach write, suggests that it "has an unsure place in today's educational climate."[71] I think that both early childhood education and imaginative teaching are appreciated for what they are but ultimately underestimated in their respective complexity and impact.

Meanwhile, teaching artistry, even with the field's rapid growth, remains a perpetual side gig in the arts economy. Rabkin et al. estimate that 75% of teaching artists work on short-term

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[66] Bradbury, "Early childhood assessment," 329.
[67] Frantz Bentley, "Banished from the Classroom," 285.
[68] Egan, *An Imaginative Approach,* xii.
[69] Duffy, 7.
[70] See the work of Paul Harris for more on the role of the imagination in development, particularly his text *The Work of the Imagination* (2000).
[71] Eckhoff and Urbach, "Understanding Imaginative Thinking," 179.

contracts that rarely renew.[72] From her own experience, Olivia has observed the precarity of the teaching artist profession: “It's more of a side job, right, so it's not necessarily your full time gig, which is a big definer. I've never known anybody who is a full time teaching artist.” The expectation that teaching artists are practicing or “professional” artists, however loosely held, relegates teaching artistry to something done on the side—and, as such, is left open to public misunderstanding and underestimation of all that a teaching artist can provide. Worse still is the misconception that teaching artistry is a reflection (or result) of poor artistic skill. As Booth notes, despite the efforts of teaching artists to prove otherwise, “the condescending attitudes still exist that assume any artist who chooses to also educate can’t be a first rate artist.”[73]

One way we see this undervaluing manifest is in how little teaching artists are paid. Autumn, who currently teaches the same class of preschoolers regularly at a school, said that as a teaching artist, you “basically get paid very little to travel very far and do a class by yourself with thirty young people.” Autumn’s account aligns closely with national salary averages; from Rabkin et al.’s report, teaching artists make only $9,800 a year from teaching and, when coupled with their other professional artistic work, an annual salary of $36,000 to $39,000.[74] Booth writes of the low compensation as a systemic issue, claiming that “the U.S. arts industry has relied on the workforce of teaching artists and community artists to accomplish its efforts at expanding audiences and serving communities in more meaningful ways, but it [has] invested next to nothing to build that field.”[75] Like the imagination in education, teaching artistry has an “unsure place” in the arts world; teaching artists are either seen as an artist’s second-rate occupation or matter but only in the sense that they do something “good.” Building the field would involve

[72] Rabkin et al., 8.
[73] Booth, “What is a Teaching Artist?”
[74] Rabkin et al., 9.
[75] Booth, “The Pandemic Crisis.”

better financial support and established infrastructure for those who comprise it, as teaching artists cannot rely on words of praise alone. Current public belief in teaching artistry, however, falls short of such action, as Rabkin et al. argue: "Education policymakers do not match rhetorical support for arts education with policies designed to move the arts closer to the center of school life… their *behavior* suggests that they presume that the arts are insufficiently cognitive and academic to be of great value in schools or to learning generally."[76] This disconnect between belief and behavior leaves teaching artistry as a field in limbo.

I'd argue that the "de-valuing" of teaching artistry is merely a reflection of the public dismissal of the arts themselves. The societal role of the arts is frequently debated as a matter of utility, class, and policy, all of which question the necessity of the arts as a service for all. Again, even though the arts are generally deemed favorable—over four-fifths of Americans believe that the arts are a "positive experience in a troubled world," while nearly 75% regard the arts as a community asset[77]—the lack of actionable support for the arts sector suggests otherwise. In the wake of COVID-19, especially, the arts have been stranded to the point of self-advocacy; the grassroots campaign Be An #ArtsHero was developed by arts workers and institutions out of the shared desire to campaign for "proportionate [COVID] relief to the arts and culture sector of the American economy."[78] The impact of this disregard during the pandemic will be long-lasting. The Brookings Institute predicts that the fine and performing arts will have lost 1.4 million jobs due to the pandemic, which represents half of all employment in these industries,[79] whereas—and specific to arts education—Palmer Wolf predicts that post-pandemic school budgets will

[76] Rabkin et al., 15.
[77] American for the Arts, *Americans Speak Out*, 4.
[78] Be An #ArtsHero, "Our Mission."
[79] Florida and Seman, *Lost Art*, 3.

bring "deep spending cuts… for arts education partnerships of all kinds."[80] As teaching artists expressed in our conversations, what's thus at risk is not only their own job but exposure to and engagement in imaginative, creative, and playful experiences that teaching artistry uniquely provides. Sienna fears this opportunity loss: "I think not every kid is an academic [who is] going to excel academically but maybe theatre class is a space where they feel really proud about themselves. And that's always my goal: to have every kid leave the class not feeling necessarily like 'I'm the best actor in the whole world!' but feeling proud of themselves, maybe doing something that scares them… I am worried that maybe those opportunities are being taken away as we continue to consider the arts irrelevant or unnecessary." It is a ripple effect: consider the arts unnecessary, and so too will teaching artistry be seen as unimportant.

The early childhood theatre teaching artist sits at the intersection of this public regard; what they do is "admirable" but not admirable *enough*. Referencing COVID-19 policies, Grace reminds me that "early childhood [care] is an essential service," and that she, as a teaching artist for young learners, is considered an essential worker. However, there remains a cultural dissonance that recognizes early childhood teaching artistry as "essential" and yet fails to provide proportionate support for teaching artists. Furthermore, this disconnect is not unique to the time of the pandemic. Matt has regularly reflected on the ability of teaching artistry to respond to broader educational needs: "I think about dramatic play and how important imagination and play is in our classrooms when funding is being cut. It's why we are essential workers… in that sense, we're just as important as teachers and we have to be a part of the conversation." Booth agrees that "the best [arts] learning for students springs from the collaborative efforts of three kinds of professionals working in coordination—a teaching artist,

[80] Palmer Wolf, "Teaching Artists as Essential Workers."

an in-school arts teacher, and an informed classroom teacher."[81] That teaching artists have to advocate to be recognized as a part of this triad, however, is telling; the field had struggled to find resonance beyond those who already consider themselves to be a teaching artist. And for some, the virtual classroom has only worsened this reality. Ryan hypothesizes: "I think some people might see teaching artists as babysitters, someone who keeps the kid busy for an hour or two while the parents work. And parents probably thought that before quarantine, but I think even more so now since the kids don't have to leave the house to take the class."

But where Ryan worries that teaching online compounds the presumed irrelevance of teaching artistry, many others have found an opportunity to demonstrate the value of it. For example, Matt names the newfound awareness on the part of families as one of the "pleasant surprises" of her virtual instruction: "Parents are seeing the impact of what we are doing [and] they're seeing their young people play and connect with other people on the screen. That to me has been the biggest win through all of this because it's hard to explain what we do, right? Like we go in and teachers [and parents], unless they are in the room with us and they are experiencing what we're doing, they're like, 'Oh, you're just like theater fairies.'" Olivia has shared the same discovery, contrasting it with previous, "normal" times when families misunderstood or didn't know what their child's class involved:

> I see a lot of siblings and a lot of parents, which is really great… [Where I worked], during "normal" times, a lot of high-powered families and parents usually had no clue what was happening in the classroom… They'd be like, "I had no idea this [was] what's going to happen… I thought my daughter was going to be on the big stage…" And I'm like, "Well, she's two. So she's not gonna be doing that." Online, it's easier. It's not this unexpected thing and the parents have no idea. Usually they're right there with them.

Here, we learn that the virtual classroom enhances the visibility of what teaching artists do. It is literally more visible: within the home, families are able to follow along to a greater extent than

[81] Booth, "What is a Teaching Artist?"

most in-person classrooms allow (I've taught several online early childhood classes where adults are even encouraged to participate as "partners in play"). But the value of teaching artistry can also be witnessed by the skill-building children undergo in the virtual classroom, particularly as these skills relate to their processing of the pandemic as a significant moment of upheaval. Matt believes that imaginative experiences online—the experiences that comprise her teaching artistry—cultivate a visible sense of joy that counter the pandemic's tragedies: "We had in our group so much tragedy… between the entire group of people moving away and friends moving away and things that we kept hitting since March. But the opportunity—that we were able to play as artists and find joy in the work and find joy in the creation of our story that we did together—was so important. And again so healing." Teaching artistry provides children the invaluable chance to play and create, an opportunity that, in turn, serve a child's ability to cope.

And yet we need the reminders of the virtual classroom because we have not realized as a society the full potential of teaching artistry. Virtual teaching, as a reset of in-person learning, lays bare the essential and critical aspects of what it is that teaching artists do—and why. Imagination is our tool, a way we can learn to understand the possibilities of ourselves and the world, while early childhood teaching artistry is a declaration that the imagination is important.

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The virtual classroom has re-contextualized the value of the imagination as it relates not only to students' lives but also those of teaching artists. Saved on my desktop, I keep a screenshot of a quote from Rachel Carson in her book *The Sense of Wonder*: "If a child is to keep alive [their] inborn sense of wonder… [they need] the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with [them] the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live

in."[82] A marine biologist and environmentalist, Carson wrote of wonder as it relates to nature, but I read her words and think of the teaching artist, who also shares in and shapes children's curiosity about the world. Meanwhile, Greene writes about the imagination as a requirement for the educator who hopes to equip students with the ability to imagine: "Imagination is as important in the lives of teachers as it is in the lives of students, in part because teachers incapable of thinking imaginatively or of releasing studies to encounter works of literature and other forms of art are probably also unable to communicate to the young what the use of imagination signifies"[83] A teaching artist's role is to communicate the value of the imagination, and so from Greene's point, I'd argue again that to be a teaching artist is *to be an advocate of the imagination for all*. This aim of teaching artistry is noticed with greatest ease in the early childhood classroom, as Autumn shares: "[With students,] I'll be like, 'I love imagining and playing pretend and I'm an adult. It makes me feel happy.' [I think it's important for children] to know that adults love it too. This isn't something that the adult is doing to trick them, but the adults are actually playing with them… It's [doesn't have to be an] intellectual discussion on why I like this, but just being like, 'It's fun! I love playing with you.'"[84]

Emphasizing the significance of the imagination may seem cliché, and to suggest that we will use our imaginations to predict what lies ahead for virtual teaching artistry is perhaps too vague a note to end on. But in many ways, that's the most practical thing we can do: the virtual classroom emerged in the pandemic's uncertain conditions, and so it must move forward in a way that directly takes into account the hazy "post-pandemic" future. Imagination is the tool that

[82] Carson, *The Sense of Wonder*, n.p.
[83] Greene, *Releasing the Imagination*, 36.
[84] Here, I return to the necessity of a direct account: I prioritize the voices of these teaching artists because they have used the imagination and will continue to do so as the virtual classroom takes on different significance in their practice

most dynamically addresses uncertainty. Some teaching artists are anxious to be back in-person with the children, sans masks and able to play without mandated distance between students. With the recognition that the virtual classroom provides a new form of access, others are more content to continue teaching online even when it is not the *only* option. Both sides are united, however, in acknowledging that whatever lies ahead for teaching artistry, it will look different from work before the pandemic. Helen foresees no simple reversion: “I think that we won't go back [and] just revert to the way it was before. I think many of us in the world in general feel that we have developed something new. There's a shift. There’s a new world now, and we know that we can use technology like this and we can connect across the world in a different way.” Olivia also believes that the knowledge that teaching artists take from the virtual classroom will inspire a shift in thinking once they are back in-person. She remarked at the close of our interview:

> Hopefully, in the future when we come back, we don't throw it all away. We embrace what we've learned and if there is a problem—which there often is in early childhood—hopefully this has helped me and other [teaching artists] be like, “Oh, well, I don't have to completely scrap that idea. Let's think of a new innovative solution…” I think [online teaching] has helped us to be like there's so many ways to make this possible and so many new things that we can try and explore… it’s a new creative way of thinking about teaching.

Olivia suggests that online instruction is a “new creative way of thinking about teaching,” but I believe it’s not so much a new approach than it is a new *context* for the teaching artist. If the virtual classroom strips teaching artistry—specifically early childhood teaching artistry—down to its essence, then we can leave it with the fundamental principles reinforced; teaching artists have figured them out again in a completely different context that will spur the foundation-building for this work post-pandemic. Most teaching artists have realized that virtual teaching, rather than limiting children’s learning, has revealed a wider array of tools and approaches in fostering imaginative education, and so we could say that from this significant period in the

virtual classroom, teaching artists have returned to the foundational intent of teaching artistry in order to move forward in their work with students.

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