

SPACE to Flourish



Encounters with charcoal

Supporting Pedagogy Arts and Creativity Everywhere

“Finding the joy in charcoal is to embrace its crumbliness and messiness - which is what charcoal does best. When young children encounter it they immediately see its potential and move with the charcoal in an embodied way to create lines, smudges, marks, and more as they cover and uncover the charcoal traces that are left behind as their body moves with the material and meets the surface of the paper.”

Debi Keyte-Hartland

The language of charcoal

Snap, crumble, grind, crush, mark, smudge, conceal, draw, darken, conceal, reveal, pulverise, explode, transfer, uncover, cover, disperse, handle, spread, sweep, dust, brush, stroke, undo, recover, remark, return, redo

Attuning and attending to children and charcoal

We invite you to journey with the children as they draw and move with charcoal

What can we learn about children when we tune into their explorations, experiences, and ideas, without making assumptions of what they should or could be doing with drawing media such as charcoal? What can we discover from attending to children's words, sounds, movements, ideas, thoughts, feelings as well as what the marks and images represent or mean?

To journey with children, requires the activating presence of an educator who is willing to learn with the children and the material in the encounter with each other. As educators, we can ask:

What do the children do with the charcoal?

and also

What does the charcoal do to the children?

To journey with children requires the educator to be **pedagogically active**, and to engage with children in their making, thinking, moving, expression, communication, exploration and investigation in sensitive ways which aim to respond to, and also enable children to extend their thinking. In a busy early years environment it can be easy to just see engagement in the arts, and exploration of arts-based materials as something which children can choose to access independently. We challenge this and agree with Brooks (2022: 86) when she states:

“When children do not find the support they need, they abandon the task and we see a characteristic decline in engagement with art...We need to tune in, show genuine interest and respect children’s ideas.”

Instead, we invite your presence to be with children, to amplify contexts of curiosity, and generate encounters with materials that invite wonder, imagination, expressivity and creativity. In this way, we believe that both children and their educators can flourish in learning together.

Becoming pedagogically active

Noticing and wondering together

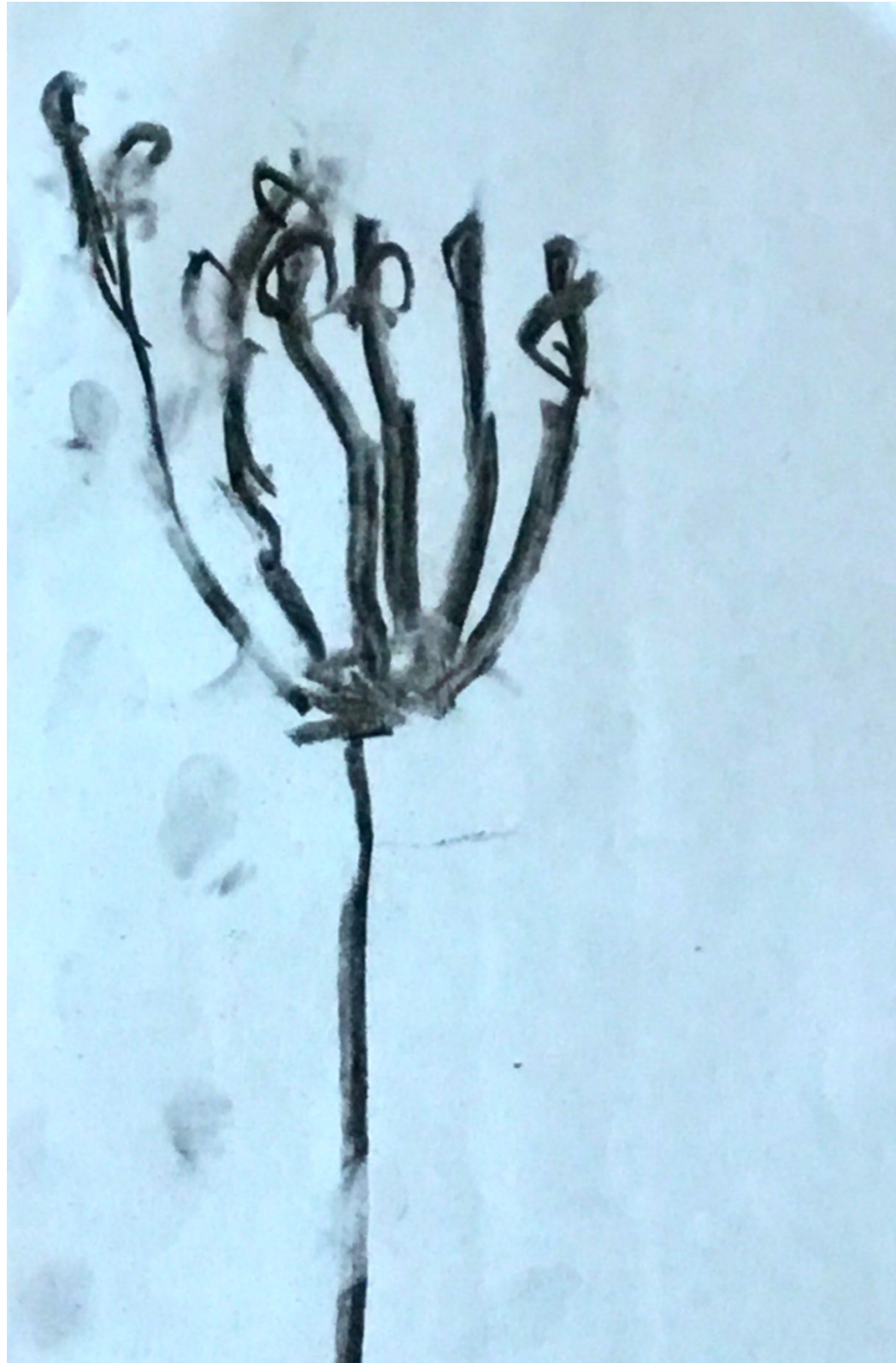
It is often assumed that we should not interfere with children's art making. Yet, we would never take that approach to children's literacy. How can children communicate (express) through art if there is no-one to listen, no one to notice, no-one to join in with thinking together in a sustained way?

Educators can activate a supportive community of learners through encouraging children to share techniques, skills, and ideas with each other and through engaging in a dialogue about the media, in noticing together about what it does, and wondering about what it could do.

- Tuning in and attending to children's explorations with interest and respect
- Active listening to marks, movements, words, sounds, actions, gestures and more
- Wondering aloud together and speculating about “what if?”
- Asking “and what else?” Inviting the child to elaborate their ideas and thoughts
- Focus in on the children's plans, and their enquiries



Going deeper with charcoal and children's ideas



Designing “what next” emerges from our consideration of what was observed

Exploration of any material is only a beginning. What else can occur, be done with it, be achieved through it? What can be explored, expressed communicated? All of the answers begin with “so what have we observed and/or noticed so far?” The aim is to extend children’s thinking and experience, and to enable them to develop their **fluency** with the material of charcoal so they can use it expressively and with increased and intentional purpose. Therefore time to repeat and revisit and to practice with the material enables children to build fluency. With fluency comes increased **intention**, with the marks made and reflection on them bringing that sense of purpose to how the charcoal is used to communicate, express and make meaning.

- Listen attentively as children draw, you are listening to gain insight into the ideas that sit behind how or what they draw - use this to build plans around of what to offer or do next with the children
- Re-visit and make multiple drawings to build greater and more complex knowledge of materials, actions, skills, techniques and ideas
- Compare and contrast drawings with children that they have made previously to ascertain what is different or similar, and ask them “what could we do next?”
- Engage in group discussion, to share awareness of differences in approaches, styles and ideas which enables both children and educators to value other ways of thinking

Curating materials in learning contexts with charcoal



The more educators understand a material, the more ways we have of exploring it with children

Curating means to thoughtfully attend and think about how educators organise materials for children. Curation is more than making things look beautiful. The material, the space, the composition and organisation are all generators of a learning experience that requires attention and thoughtfulness. Curation amplifies possibility for learning in this way and challenges thoughts that reduce planning to “so what can we put out today?”

Curation enables relationships to be formed between material exploration and between curriculum and other areas of learning and can develop our awareness of the possibilities we would like to encourage in our learning spaces. It means we also have to stay open to what might also emerge and unfold, rather than limit to only what we know and understand. We have to learn and grow too! Curation is more than just open-ended and accessible resources that can remove the need for an attuned and present educator.

Curation amplifies the relations and forging of connections between children’s action (what they do with and to materials like charcoal) and their ideas, and how they are building and communicating knowledge and understanding about the world. Curating materials involves courage on behalf of the educator to make choices and decisions based on the interpretation and reflection of what they have observed children doing. It is informed choice-making based on educators’ knowledge of children, their interests, motivations and their approaches to learning - without it, it is just stuff stored in baskets and boxes on a shelf.

- **How do you develop knowledge of what materials, like charcoal can do?**
- **How could charcoal be used to connect with your children’s current enquiries or with experiences such as forest school?**
- **What leads your choices of how to present materials like charcoal to your children?**



SPACE to Flourish in Early Childhood

Supporting Pedagogy Arts & Creativity Everywhere

With

Cathy Gunning & Debi Keyte-Hartland
Early Education Associate Consultants