

On form

Nursery art and craft studios provide a dedicated space for both children and practitioners to be creative, writes *Annette Rawstrone*, who finds out how four settings are making the most of theirs

Studios in nurseries are growing in popularity. These dedicated art spaces – sometimes referred to as ateliers – are wonderful places for children to have the time and room to explore their creativity, make choices and gain stimulating experiences. But they need to be resourced and staffed appropriately.

‘So often you see quite directed creative opportunities in nurseries, but the principle behind a studio is to give children greater ownership of their work,’ says early years consultant Caroline Eaton. ‘They are about providing an area where children have the time and space to explore, get things wrong and refine in order

to go deeper into their learning, rather than create an end product.’

While early years consultant Kathy Ring cautions that creativity should be demonstrated across the setting, she believes having a studio can foster ways of thinking that characterise the types of learning that practitioners want to happen throughout the nursery. ‘Creating a studio space provides an opportunity for practitioners to consider in depth the provision they make for children’s meaning-making through art and design media and materials. How we set up the environment, the kind of resources we put in it and the routines and rituals that provide a model for children’s use of it reflect our expectations and values,’ says Dr Ring.

Studios should be inspiring places that look stimulating and attractive, so careful thought needs to be given to how to display and store art materials and artwork so that it’s easy for children to access and put away. ‘It’s important for nurseries to embrace the principle and not think that they need to have an amazing studio straightaway. It’s all about giving children choice. I’d expect to see children being independent with the adults there to support without interfering or taking over,’ envisages Ms Eaton. ‘The children should have a choice of media and be able to work on a range of scales. There does not need to be loads of everything, which can be overwhelming, but it should be ordered and organised.’

THAMES TIDDLERS NURSERY IN WOOLWICH, LONDON

‘I’d advise anyone wanting to set up a studio to be brave and do it. I fell in love with the Reggio Emilia ethos and set up our atelier in 2012. We’ve recently opened one for babies and toddlers too,’ says atelierista and early years teacher Rachel Robertson.

‘Start by choosing a room, strip everything out of it and think how the

At Thames Tiddlers Nursery, children work with wire and rubber tubing, and use Nikon cameras





space works. Don't make my mistake and buy lots of big furniture, instead keep it minimal until you see how you inhabit the space. Our children often like working on the floor or standing at a table so I've removed furniture and trimmed the legs on a coffee table for children to stand at. Give thought to how you want to display the materials and give value to them.

'Good-quality materials such as acrylic paint, watercolours, canvas and clay are expensive – we source a lot off Amazon – but loose parts are wonderful and can be obtained for little or no cost. We ask parents for items such as plastic milk-bottle lids, which are great for construction, and glass jars and have recently joined a wonderful local scrap store. I particularly like working with wire, sourced from the scrap store and clay in terracotta and grey – we use Scola, which is non-toxic and air drying – because they're great for sculptures and can also be used with objects such as shells and wood.

'Ateliers are all very different and personal. They don't take shape until the atelierista [artist] starts working there with the children. Then they start to take form and get that lovely lived-in feeling.'

REFLECTIONS NURSERY IN WORTHING, SUSSEX

'The principle behind our studio is that it's a workshop, lab and art studio, a place where smaller groups of children can do more focused work,' says director Martin Pace. 'The room is a blank canvas to fill with what the children's interests are so we only put in the space what is needed to support the next level of their investigations.

'Light is useful because it draws focus on an object or can be used to project and create an immersive digital landscape by projecting across the room, which draws children in with the "wow" factor and retains a sense of purpose. For example, if children are investigating flowers, they may put a jug of flowers in the studio, an OHP projecting flowers and a light box in order to look more closely at them.

'We buy Sturdy light boxes from Fafunia because they are strong, bright and last for years. We use light panels, such as LightPad from Mini Sun, which are portable and have a good-quality light, and get the old-fashioned, heavy overhead projectors online because we find they are the safest and don't overheat. The children also use a Zoomy wireless hand-held microscope, which captures still photos and videos. It is robust and easy for the children to handle. Amazon sells them but we got ours a little cheaper on eBay, and TTS does an Easi-Scope, which is similar.'

BRIGHT HORIZONS NURSERIES

'If we're building a new nursery we factor in room for a studio because it gives children a dedicated space to engage and immerse themselves in art projects individually or collaboratively. There's no need to pack their work away; they can revisit their creations, just like professional artists do,' says director of early years Nicola Amies.

'We use Community Playthings' furniture in our studios because it's designed with children in mind. The tables have adjustable legs, clean well and are lovely to look at. Similarly, we

WHERE TO BUY

Equipment and resources:

- www.amazon.co.uk
- Consortium Education, www.education-supplies.co.uk
- Fafunia, www.fafuplay.com
- www.hobbycraft.co.uk
- www.hope-education.co.uk
- www.mini-sun.co.uk
- www.modroc.com
- www.reflectionsonlearning.co.uk
- www.seawhite.co.uk/online
- www.stabilo.com/uk
- www.tts-group.co.uk

Furniture:

- www.community-playthings.co.uk
- www.etsy.com/uk
- www.ikea.com/gb/en

FURTHER READING

- *In the Spirit of the Studio: Learning from the Atelier of Reggio Emilia*, by Lella Gandini, Lynn Hill, Louise Cadwell and Charles Schwall (Teachers College Press)
- *The Language of Art: Inquiry-Based Studio Practices in Early Childhood Settings*, by Ann Pelo (Redleaf Press)
- *Art and Creativity in Reggio Emilia: Exploring the Role and Potential of Ateliers in Early Childhood Education*, by Veia Vecchi (Routledge)

like their easels because they're on lockable wheels – good for practitioner's backs – and have magnets to hold paper. Children like to work on a large scale, inspired by Jackson Pollock, so in some nurseries we have batons to hang large canvases and paper.

'We supply a wide range of good-quality creative media such as charcoal, oil pastels and proper clay – we avoid the artificial clay ones with fibres – along with different-sized tools, brushes and rollers, which we buy from Consortium.

'Children's artwork is kept on built-in shelving or stored in art racks. We also have books and posters, featuring artists such as Matisse and Goldsworthy, bought from galleries for the children to take inspiration from.'

LITTLE BARN OWLS IN HORSHAM, SUSSEX

'Having an atelier meets our values of providing quality time, space and resources for children to build enquiries for themselves,' says managing director Hayley Peacock.

'Currently, children are exploring sea creatures, seaweed and sea caves, so our atelier, based in a lodge in the garden, is set up like a cave with the windows blacked out. There are rocks and seaweed to explore and objects to make caves out of such as bowls and crates. Children are designing sea cars and modelling them out of modroc.

'We're not afraid to limit the resources on offer, which helps the children to focus, encourages deeper learning and experimentation. At the moment children have access to a range of colours appropriate to their research – eight different greens, five brown and four versions of white, grey and black.

'Ateliers should be resourced with good-quality graphic materials. Staples include chalk, charcoal, watercolour pencils, colour and black Stabilo fineliners, pastels and HB pencils – fine and thick graphite all in a range of shades. We buy these from TTS, Hobbycraft, source from Amazon and get higher-grade items, such as individual sketch pads, specialist paper and watercolour crayons, from Seawhite art suppliers. We have lots of shelving to display the materials, rather than hide them in cupboards, and have mixed lovely shelving from the US, sourced online from Etsy, with Ikea pieces.

'Children enter the atelier and become more experimental and expressive. They become artists.' ■