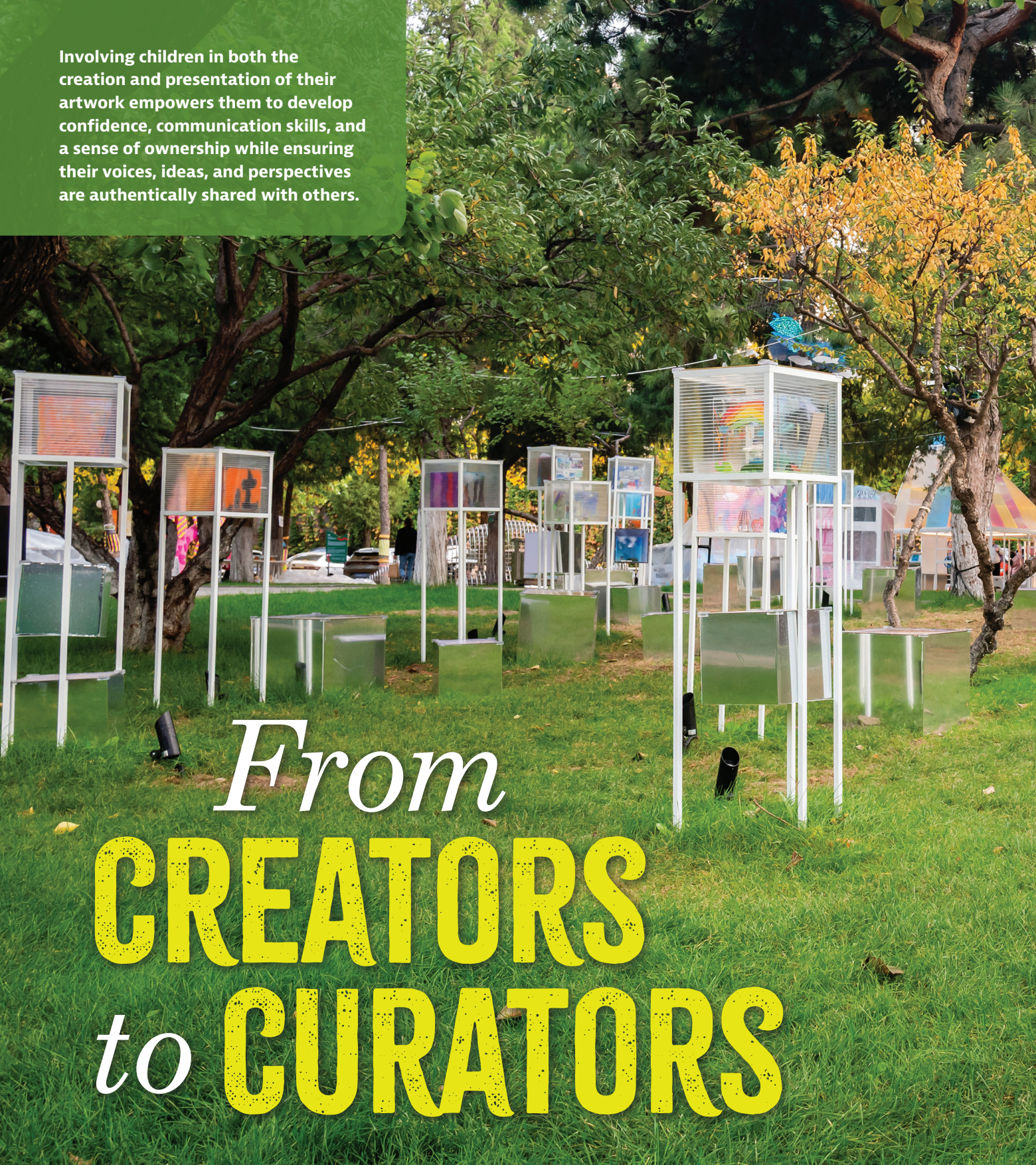


Involving children in both the creation and presentation of their artwork empowers them to develop confidence, communication skills, and a sense of ownership while ensuring their voices, ideas, and perspectives are authentically shared with others.



From **CREATORS** *to* **CURATORS**

**Empowering Children Through
Nature-Based Art Exhibitions**

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Figure 1. Children carried their “Sky Blind Boxes” onto the lawn and began discussing where each piece should be placed in relation to the sky, trees, and display structures. (All photos courtesy of the author and program staff.)

On the afternoon of the outdoor exhibition, light rain began to fall unexpectedly. The lawn had turned damp and muddy, but the weather did not diminish the children’s excitement. Holding their handmade “Sky Blind Boxes,” they walked carefully onto the grass, looking for spots to place their work. Some children compared display stand positions, while others examined how the boxes looked against the trees and the gray sky. What might have been a

simple final showcase quickly became something more active and thoughtful: the children were curating.

This shift mattered. Too often, school art projects end when the artwork is finished. Children may be invited to make, decorate, and share their creations, but they are rarely given meaningful responsibility for how those works are arranged, interpreted, or experienced in public space. As a result, art learning can remain centered on production alone, rather



Figure 2. During the indoor project-based learning sessions, children experimented with color, structure, and layered materials as they constructed their three-dimensional “Sky Blind Boxes.”

than on opportunities for children to develop voice, agency, and spatial awareness through presentation itself. The project described in this article responded to that challenge by treating exhibition-making as part of the learning process, not merely as a final display.

After four indoor project-based learning sessions focused on making the artworks, the final session invited children to step into a different role. They became not only creators, but also decision-makers responsible for how their work would be seen. In one group, a very quiet girl who had been hesitant to speak at first became unexpectedly active during the installation process. Guided by an 8-year-old team leader, she began helping other children move their boxes, paying

close attention to whether each placement felt right. Nearby, parents stood watching, taking notes as the children discussed the exhibition. Later, some parents said the experience even gave them ideas for decorating their homes. In this moment, the lawn became more than a display site; it became a space where children’s artistic choices, confidence, and leadership could become visible.

The Spark of Cross-Disciplinary Learning

The outdoor exhibition did not emerge suddenly. The four indoor project-based learning sessions gradually moved children from observation to image-making, from design to construction, and from personal

expression to public presentation. The course used the sky as its starting point and the blind box as its artistic form, inviting children to explore not only natural and ecological phenomena, but also broader questions related to weather, climate change, and renewable energy.

In the early sessions, children were introduced to the sky through sensory prompts and artist study. Rather than encouraging only bright or decorative color choices, the teaching invited them to express their own impressions of the sky as they genuinely perceived it. This gave children permission to work with mood, atmosphere, and memory, not simply with conventionally “pretty” colors. From there, they moved into planning. Even though many of them had never formally learned perspective, they worked hard to sketch cube-like structures as design plans for their own boxes.

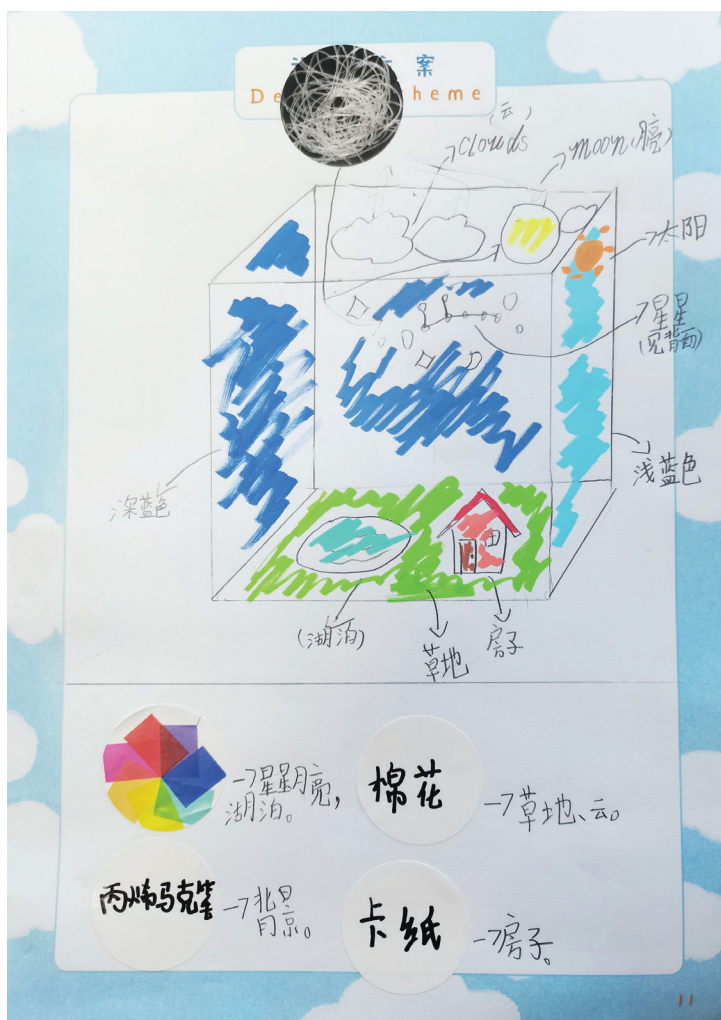


Figure 3. Design sketches helped children move from two-dimensional ideas into three-dimensional planning, even before they had formal training in perspective drawing.



Figure 4. Children explored how light, transparency, and layered imagery could shape the atmosphere inside each box.

The process mattered as much as the result: they were beginning to imagine space, not just surface.

As the boxes took shape, children experimented with materials in highly exploratory ways. They investigated oil-and-water separation effects, shaped mountains and rocks from soaked recycled paper, and showed strong awareness of environmental responsibility through their material choices. Some became especially excited about adding light strips inside their boxes. One child explained that she wanted her work to be seen in brightness rather than darkness because she liked the feeling of light. This small comment revealed something important: children were not simply assembling objects but thinking about how their work would be experienced.

Each blind box also included a small recording device with up to two minutes of audio. In those recordings, some children introduced their work, while others offered quiet messages to their parents. These layered choices — visual, spatial, material, and sonic — laid the foundation for the curatorial thinking that would later unfold outdoors.

Empowering Student Curators

The final outdoor session transformed the project in a significant way. Children were no longer focused only



Figure 5. Parents observed from nearby as children discussed the exhibition, offering encouragement without taking over the decision-making process.

on finishing their own “Sky Blind Boxes”; they now had to decide how to place those works in a shared public space. This required a new kind of thinking. Some of the taller children initially preferred to place the boxes higher, while younger children often wanted them lower. These differences revealed that curation was not simply about display, but also about perspective, access, and how each child imagined the viewer’s experience.

One of the most interesting discussions explored orientation. At first, many children wanted to face their boxes toward the side where they themselves were standing. Yet in a public exhibition space, viewers move around and encounter works from multiple directions. With the teacher’s guidance, the children gradually began to understand this shift. They started to think less as makers standing beside their own work and more as curators considering how others would approach, notice, and experience the exhibition. This was an important turning point. It showed that curatorial practice involves not only placing objects,

but also shaping relationships between artwork, space, and audience.

Throughout this process, children compared positions, adjusted placements, and negotiated with one another. The teacher did not simply determine the final arrangement; instead, the adult’s role was to pose questions that helped children see the space more fully. In this way, the exhibition became a site for leadership, collaboration, and aesthetic decision-making. Children were learning that presenting art publicly also means taking responsibility for how meaning is shared.

Although this project was not designed as a formal research study, several indicators suggested that the approach was successful. Children increasingly made independent decisions about placement, height, and orientation, and they were able to explain those choices in relation to light, space, and viewer experience. Participation also broadened: children who were initially hesitant became more active during installation, while older peers took on supportive leadership roles. In

addition, parents engaged with the exhibition as attentive observers rather than directors, responding to children's decisions with encouragement and, afterward, describing how the experience changed the way they thought about arranging objects in everyday space.

A Story of Transformation

One of the clearest transformations was observed in a child who rarely spoke at first. At the beginning of the curatorial discussion, she was hesitant to speak and seemed unsure about joining in. What made a difference was the way an 8-year-old group leader intentionally included her. During the planning conversation, the older child kept asking, "What do you think we should do?" and "Why did you choose this color?" Later, as the group prepared for the final exhibition presentation, she crouched down beside the younger girl and gently said they could introduce the work together, and there was no need to be afraid.



Figure 6. Peer support was an important part of the curatorial process, as children discussed placement, presentation, and how to introduce their work to others.

The change became apparent when the installation began. As soon as the group leader said, "Let's start," the quiet girl suddenly stepped forward and announced, "I'm very strong. You see, I can carry two!" From that moment on, she became highly engaged in helping move the blind boxes and paid close attention to whether their positions would affect the final exhibition. Her participation was no longer peripheral. She had found a way into the shared work.

This moment mattered because it showed that curation can create multiple forms of participation. A child does not have to be the loudest speaker to be a meaningful contributor. In this case, leadership was not only exercised by the older child who invited and supported participation, but also by the younger child who stepped into action once she felt seen, trusted, and needed.

Bringing the Sky to Your School

One of the most transferable aspects of this project is that student curation need not be treated as an extra activity after art-making is finished. Instead, it can be built into the learning design from the beginning. In our case, the children first explored the sky through sensory experience, artist study, painting, design sketches, and material experimentation before moving on to public display. This sequence mattered because it gave them time to build ideas before being asked to make curatorial decisions. Educators who want to try a similar approach can begin with a broad interdisciplinary question — such as how weather shapes what we notice, how light changes color, or how art can help children express environmental change — and then design the project in stages.

A second key lesson is to leave room for real student decisions. Children do not become curators simply because their work is displayed. They become curators when they are invited to decide where work should go, how it should face viewers, what should be grouped together, and what kind of experience they want the audience to have. For teachers, this means shifting from giving answers to asking questions: What should viewers notice first? How does this piece change in natural light? Does this work belong higher or lower? What happens if we turn it another way? These questions support children's thinking without taking the final decision away from them.

A third lesson is that the exhibition space does not need to be elaborate. A lawn, courtyard, hallway, classroom corner, fence, or window area can all become meaningful curatorial spaces. What matters is

not the size of the site, but rather whether children are asked to think about the relationship between artwork, space, and audience. Outdoor environments can be especially powerful because light, wind, moisture, and surrounding color make the exhibition dynamic rather than fixed. At the same time, schools with fewer outdoor options can still adapt the approach by using available public-facing spaces indoors.

Finally, educators should treat uncertainty as part of the learning process. In our exhibition, children had to respond to rain, wet ground, different viewing heights, and changing orientations in the public space. These were not distractions from learning; they were part of what made the curatorial work authentic. When children negotiate these conditions together, they practice leadership, collaboration, flexibility, and care for shared outcomes. In this sense, a student-led exhibition is not simply a way to show finished art. It is itself a form of learning.

Conclusion: Beyond the Blind Box

What children learned through this project went beyond making a three-dimensional artwork. They learned how to place an idea in public space, how to consider other people's perspectives, and how to work with others to shape a shared experience. By the time they stepped onto the lawn, they were no longer only creators of "Sky Blind Boxes." They were curators making decisions about light, height, orientation, and meaning.

This shift matters because it changes the role children play in art education. Instead of being asked only to produce work, they are trusted to interpret, present, and care for how that work enters the world. For educators, this is a reminder that exhibitions do not have to mark the end of learning; they can be one of the moments when learning becomes most visible.

Disclosure Statement:

The authors report no conflict of interest.



Figure 7. Placed throughout the landscape, the finished works invited viewers to encounter children's ideas across the outdoor environment rather than in a single fixed display.