Designing for Children
- With focus on 'Play + Learn'

Creativity Matters: Embedding Creative Practices in Early Years Education

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Abstract: During 2006 Ealing Council partnered with The Engine Room, University of the Arts, London to develop 'Creativity Matters', a pilot test within four Children's Centres to determine the impact of embedding creative professionals in early years education.

Each centre received professional development into issues surrounding children's creativity and the multiple languages of children. An artist (or team of artists) was placed in each setting for approximately 2 days per week to work with teachers, children's centre professionals, the children and their families and communities. In the first year four children's centres were involved in the project. After the success of the pilot phase, the project has continued for a second, third and fourth phase, each phase increasing the number of settings involved. The fourth phase will take place over the academic year of 2009/10, and will involve a total of 16 settings.

The project is designed to promote the creative capacity of children, and increase access and engagement in the arts, whilst providing high quality participatory arts and promoting children's cultural citizenship. Involvement in the project acknowledges the experiences, skills, passions and gifts of children, practitioners, artists and other creative and education professionals.

The contention of this project is that creative expression and the arts are ideally suited to providing the means for children's cultural citizenship and educational potential to be developed and extended. The project gives high priority to issues of future literacies, communication technologies, community acceptance and involvement at a personal, local and national level. It was further suggested that high quality arts involvement in the early years could have a positive benefit on a child's transition into formal schooling and improve educational outcomes.

Within this project we have gathered evidence about changes and development in these areas for the children involved:

1. Curiosity
2. Confidence
3. Independence as Learners
4. Problem Solving
5. Children's 'sense of community'
6. Changes in children's languages
7. Children's sense of identity and culture
8. Children's sense of space
9. Children's concentration within the learning environment

These areas were chosen on the basis of an extensive literature review that indicated that successful transition into early years and subsequently into formal school education was a combination of the above 9 areas of development. Overall a number of positive impacts have been

found for children in relation to these 9 areas, some of which challenge commonly held perceptions about children and learning processes.

Over the past three phases, it has been found that Creativity Matters is a highly effective way to improve children's learning and social skills in the early years. Furthermore, the project has had generally successful outcomes for early years' practitioners and artists and improved links to other educational providers, especially the links between secondary school, higher education and early years centres. The project encouraged greater use of cultural and community facilities and made some improvements to models of family learning and community sustainability.

Key words: Creativity Matters; early years; Ealing; creativity; child-led approach; play; art-based learning.

Paint Play

1. Introduction

This paper will address two aspects of the Creativity Matters project. The first relates to the areas of children's learning, which have been outlined in the abstract. For the sake of brevity, two areas will be considered, specifically 'changes in children's languages', and 'independence as learners'. Within each area we have observed a number of approaches by creative practitioners, however here we will consider one specific approach with each area to give a taste of how creative activities are being used in children's development.

The second aspect to be discussed in this paper relates to sustainability and the indirect impacts of the project upon staff, the school as a whole, and the wider community. These 'indirect impacts' have helped to further embed the project within each school and have acted as a 'legacy' for each school once the project has come to a close.

2. Children's Learning

Ealing is the third largest borough in London, and is recognised as having the fourth most ethnically diverse population of the 354 local authority areas in the country. Most of the schools in this area are faced with issues of classes with a high number of ESL (English as a second language) children, or with not English at all when they first enter the school system. These language issues can slow a child's progress and often hides the child's talent and potential in other subjects and lowers their achievements in all areas of the curriculum. Moreover, language difficulties have a great impact on a personal level, such as social skills, confidence and self-esteem. As Creativity Matters is focused on the Foundation Stage, it took up the challenge of supporting language improvements and increasing children's wider communication skills.

Across the project, artists and creative professionals use a variety of approaches in addressing challenges like this one. One particular artist used 'helicopter stories' to address language issues in her school. In her own words, the artist describes 'helicopter stories' as follows:

> It is clear that as an educator there is a need to ask questions to the children all of the time. The classroom, then, creates its own set of communication parameters – this is not how we talk, however in our everyday interactions: when we talk it is dialogue, and in the fantasy world of play where there are fluid rules and everything is accepted, grammar and enunciation are not an issue: there is no right, there is no self-censorship. This is why using helicopter storytelling, as we did today, is so valuable and exciting. The children came to me one by one to dictate their stories, invested and absolutely resolved I set them down word for word. Often the opening line would be, 'I don't know what to say. I don't know.' I would ask, 'Is that the beginning? Should I write it?' They would respond, 'Yes', and I absolutely believe that this was a test – to see if I would really write it, and write it just the ways they said it – no censorship! After crossing that hurdle, the words would mostly flow – they were so definite about their words, and so sure when the story was over. A few of the braver ones came back for a second or even

third go, and at least two children whose first language is not English created stories, one using mostly actions and mime. It was electrifying to hear Child A say, 'Tomorrow we make another one. Ok. Tomorrow more.'

The aim of this technique is to value the voice of the child. The artist works with one child at a time, and writes down every word and sound that they make. This immediately resonates with the child, and creates a record of the narrative they are trying to communicate. Over a period of time, the artist continues to work with each child to build upon their stories, leading to a fully formed narrative.

Examples of 'Helicopter Stories' (as recorded by the artist)

Child A:
Banana ice lolly lollipop banana apul owange food cheese and me milk cawut bunana apul owange cawut food. Cheese an meelk rice and meelk food. Cheese and fice five a day captain hook food. Banana an cheese milk an rice. Rice an food Food an milk Meelk an rice meelk an chicken an sandwich an rice an fruit an vegetable.

Child B:
Snake baby snack banana pineapple pie cars bad car red car green car car nannys car brrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr dinosaur crocodile snap! Snep and bite de car car jasp cwash beby ta ta cam b'ching piness. Finish.

Child C:
I want stronaut and deep sea diver. A dolphin jumps. And then udder one. Fish. Den octopus Jellyfish a deep sea diver again and gain stronaut. Den dolphin. Den ocean fish. And a dark and a ligh fish dey deep sea diver. Den some nuther gain stronaut. Den dolphin. Den deep sea diver. Finish.

Feedback from the teachers on the use of 'helicopter stories' confirmed that children not only improved their language and speaking skills, but also showed more confidence and self-esteem when speaking with each other and with adults.

Movement and Storytelling

Often the project team comes across approaches to activities for the children that are led and directed by the adults, in other words, the teachers and practitioners. Many use pre-cut templates for their activities, asking the children to copy what they see, and across a number of schools, this results in the end product not only looking the same, but avoids incorporating any ideas or direction a child may want to take. To address this issue in encouraging a child-led approach, and to help the children develop independence as learners, one artist uses a range of materials to help frame the activities. In this approach, small groups of children are presented with basic and recycled materials such as: tape, glue, plastic, cardboard, tins, straws, tin foil, buttons, beads, boxes, paper, along with basic equipment such as scissors, rulers and glue-guns. The children are then given a topic or direction and asked to construct to this theme, for example, build a dragon. As they are constructing, the children are encouraged to verbalise what they are building, and what materials they are using to do so.

In the example below, groups of children were asked to use foil and other bits of materials to construct a hanging sculpture. As the children were making, they were encouraged to apply their imagination to the process, and in doing so, the sculpture was gradually transformed through the children's making. In this way the children take responsibility for their learning, and gain independence through the making and transformative valuing of the activity. Teachers gave the following account of the sculpture as it travelled from between classrooms:

Reception Class 1:

We split the class into 2 and each group worked with the artist. She gave them bits of foil and asked them to roll it and twist it until they have made any shape, they enjoyed working together and extending their ideas and thinking. They learn how to work as a team and share their ideas.

Reception Class 2:

We hung a foil structure/sculpture that the artist has made with Class 1 in our classroom. She explained to the children that they could make long shapes with the foil that they could then attach to the existing hanging sculpture. The children tore off different lengths of foil, rolled or scrunched them up and wrapped and dangled them off the sculpture. The children got excited and started to use longer and longer pieces of foil. One of the girls used a piece of foil to make a headdress with a train hanging down! The artist explained that she was going to add to the foil sculpture with the nursery children on Friday.

Additional note from Reception Class 2:

We kept the foil sculpture hanging in Reception Class and added to it over Chinese New Year. The children decided to hang some of the Chinese lanterns from the sculpture. They then started hanging strips of crepe paper, tissue paper and any other material from the collage trays. It transformed the foil sculpture into a very colourful piece.

Nursery Class 1:

The artist hung the foil sculpture reception made earlier on the string and invited nursery children to come and create their own objects and to attach them to the existing structure. This was a great opportunity for the children to develop on their existing CLL (language) and social development skills. The children showed lots of interest in this activity. They enjoyed the feel of foil and expressed this by discussing what it feels like, and what they can do with foil to each other.

Nursery Class 2: The artist hung up the foil sculptural structure and explained that she wanted the children to add to it using their own foil creations. The children had great fun scrunching, tearing, fixing and twisting the foil. The children worked on their own individual ideas – jewellery, knights, balls, etc. They really enjoyed

this activity and were all on task throughout. The children enjoyed having the freedom to create whatever they wanted and it was a great opportunity to see their creative sides.

Foil Sculpture

In both of these examples, and within the larger objectives of the project, all creative activities delivered by artists and creative professionals were able to address specific areas of the curriculum such as language and basic skills (cutting, folding, making), as well as softer outcomes such as confidence, self-esteem, imagination, and collaboration. Whilst the above examples are focused upon outcomes for the children, they also hint at some of the indirect outcomes from the project for staff and the wider school community, such as cross-classroom sharing which will now be briefly discussed.

3. Indirect Impacts
The structure of the project occurs across a three year cycle; in the first year, a school receives full funding for both artist time and resources; in the second year, this funding is reduced by half; and in the third year schools receive no funding. Across all three years, the Engine Room project team provides project management, research and evaluation support. The aim of this structure is to build up a base of knowledge and skills, and

encourage schools to value a creative approach to teaching and learning, in order they can take this up themselves once the project team has withdrawn.

With this in mind, a number of indirect impacts have been discovered as arising from the project. These are in addition to the actual physical product an artist may leave behind in a school, such as a sculpture, mosaic, piece of artwork, etc. For the sake of brevity, this paper will discuss two of these findings, although many more have been found over the past four phases of the project.

As mentioned above, funding is gradually reduced to encourage schools to divert their own funding into continuing the project on their terms. To date, roughly 50% of schools who have participated in the project have diverted extra funding to continuing their engagement with artists and creative professionals. This has been done to various extents, for instance one school has continued to pay their artist to work with the children a day a week across the school year, whilst other schools have matched the funding in the second year, or have asked artists to come in to deliver projects within a specific timescale.

Another indirect impact has been more school-wide, in the valuing of a creative approach towards teaching and learning. After completion of the project, several schools have continued to use Engine Room as a resource and guide on issues of creativity. For example, one school has changed their professional development approach, by using artists and creative professionals to deliver courses instead of standard training methods. In addition, although the project took place within the Foundation Stage of each school, informal conversations with teachers at higher levels took place. The project became a discussion point throughout the school and as other teachers not directly involved requested information and engagement with the creative methods being used. Many often 'borrowed' the artist or creative professional for a short period of time to come into their classroom to deliver activities, allowing the project to spill into other classrooms.

6. Conclusion

To conclude this discussion, there are some basic principles on embedding creative practices in an early years environment that have arisen from the project. First, the project has shown that creative practice within the classroom has the potential to alter teaching and learning practices throughout the school, for staff and senior management alike. A creative approach provides an alternative way to view process, whether this is

how to interpret and deliver the curriculum or how to conduct professional development for staff.

Second, a child-led approach is important. Free and imaginative play allows children the time and space within their day to think freely. This empowers children by allowing them to choose not only the activities they would like to engage with but also how they learn from these activities. This is a flexible approach, giving children the opportunity to decide for themselves, which leads to all of the soft outcomes, i.e. confidence, greater concentration and memory, etc., and allows children to personally value the activity they are doing.

That said, we are not devaluing a more traditional, structured approach, as we feel it is necessary to ensure that children have a level of basic skills to make the most of a creative, child-led approach. Children who can use scissors, tie their own shoes, use utensils, etc. are then better able to take advantage of what the artist is offering and in turn help each other in their creative play. Rather, we are advocating the use of flexible, creative methods within early years classrooms. This provides for a more holistic approach to children's learning and development. Furthermore, creative development should be assessed through all of the curriculum areas. As the artists and creative professionals have shown through their work with the children, creativity as a way of thinking and doing can been seen as contributing to all subjects.

Creative Framing

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