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Interpreting theory and creating practice

Wickett, Karen

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Early Years Educator

Mark Allen Group

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Arts in practice: Interpreting theory and creating practice

Sarah Parsons - early years (EY) lead at the Action for Children's Green Ark Children's Centre and Jacqueline Slade - director/artist at the Soapbox children's theatre reflect on their collaboration during the Learning and Creating workshops. First Dr Karen Wickett, – BA Early Childhood Studies (ECS) lecturer University of Plymouth discusses the process of establishing our partnership and provides an overview of the Learning and Creating workshops.

In October 2019 Sarah and Jacqueline attended a session where I shared findings of a scoping activity, which aim to identify existing A&C experiences for young children across Plymouth. A key finding was A&C organisations provided many opportunities for children and their families, but there were fewer collaborations between them and EY settings.

After the meeting Jacqueline and Sarah expressed an interest in the three of us developing a project together. Our aim was to create a pilot project for children, their parents, practitioners, and students to experience rich, beautiful arts and learning experiences. The project comprised of a series of six 'Learning and Creating workshops' funded by Cornwall and Devon's Children's University. Due to the covid-19 pandemic we had to postpone the workshops until guidance from government and our associated organisations allowed us to meet.

When planning the workshops Jacqueline explained during the Covid lockdown, she and her co-director had developed 'The Spellbound Garden' a small, wooded area at the back of the children's theatre. We agreed this would be the perfect enchanting and fun space to invite practitioners, families and students, and it was covid safe.

The learning and creating workshops started during May 2021. Those that took part in the workshops were Jacqueline, a dancer from Exim Dance, two EY practitioners, two ECS students, an illustration student, six parents, nine children and myself.

I was keen that the role of the artist would not be as entertainer or as an intervention to fill gaps in children's and adults' learning and creativity. Instead, the role of the artist was a partner in designing the curriculum and experiences.

The project – Learning and Creating

Workshop 1

Underpinned by the belief that we were partners in planning the curriculum, this workshop enabled artists, practitioners and students to ask questions, consider each other's perspectives, learn and negotiate how we were going to listen to the children.

To support our discussions, we referred to the Characteristics of Effective Learning (DfE, 2021). My previous research found that the qualities of the CoEL (DfE, 2021) were familiar to practitioners and artists. Other frameworks discussed were the levels of involvement and well-being (Laevers, 1999) and Gibb's reflective cycle. The frameworks provided us a shared language to draw on when analysing and discussing our observations of the children's play, learning and creating during the following workshops.

We planned an environment that would foster children's and adults' creativity by including open ended resources and uninterrupted time. Pens, paper, iPads were provided for everyone to record their thoughts and observations in words, photographs, drawings etc. These were the basis of the adults' reflective discussions at the beginning and end of the following workshops.

Workshops two, three, four and five

Each workshop started and ended with children and adults meeting to share their ideas, observations, and reflections. Also, during the first meeting I explained how our reflective discussions from the previous week had informed the planning for the session. In between the meetings there was an hour and half for all to create and learn through play.

Following the workshop artists, practitioners and students met to make visible the learning and creating that happened during the sessions. Episodes of learning and creating were documented in writing, drawings and photographs. Books were made for each child which included their stories of learning and creating. Resources were planned for the next session.

A celebration.

The final session was a celebration, with cakes and drinks, held at the University. Certificates, Children's University teddies, and books which documented the children's and their families learning and creativity were presented to them.

Sarah shares her reflection of our collaboration:

When I was invited to the initial meeting in October 2019 a fire ignited inside me, the buzz from the group was infectious and it felt like the beginning of a journey to really explore arts in the EY. The people present wanted to be there, they were passionate and wanted to make a difference to young children's experiences, something I had not seen on the ground since I joined Action for Children in Plymouth.

Having to postpone the workshops was frustrating but it gave Jacqueline, Karen and myself time to build relationships, albeit from our kitchen tables over Zoom. I believed this enabled us to share and grow our values and vision for working together. Session one provided a face-to-face opportunity to share our EY settings experiences with the artists and students to plan the workshops. This was a safe space for us to challenge ourselves and each other teasing out our preconceived ideas of the arts, EY and consider our roles when working together. It was good to plan together as it gave us the opportunity to contribute to what we would like the workshops to look like. As family support workers we believe it is crucial to build positive relationships with parents. Starting each session with a reflective discussion enabled us to build positive relationships between children, parents, practitioners, artists and students. These enabled everyone to experience positive interactions, that

their experiences and ideas were valued as they contributed to the planning of the next session.

As EY leader, the planning session and workshops not only excited me but gave me the opportunity to reflect on how we plan for children's learning and involve the arts and artists in the EY setting. We revisited tools for observation that we hadn't used recently in our daily practice such as the levels of involvement and the Characteristics of Effective learning (CoFL). Too often we get caught up in outcomes decided by local and national policy makers instead of the children we support. Working with the artists and the students gave me time and space to re-evaluate our practice. I was reminded how competent children are at extending their learning and communicating with us in their play. Now I focus on children's, their adults and the process of learning rather than just educational outcomes.

Jacqueline shares her reflection of our collaboration:

Usually, the Soapbox theatre and Exim dance, facilitate sessions by offering pre-planned ideas, as a stimulus for children to create and devise their work through play, movement and voice. The sessions proposed by Karen were, however, to start by first noticing how children played, moved and voiced their "fascinations" and then we joined them to construct and embellish upon these and learn together.

I was intrigued by the children's intentions as they created and played with the natural resources. The willow tunnel afforded the opportunities to be and move as trains. I engaged with the children, by noticing how they moved and the sounds they made and was accepted into the "play". There was no distinction between adult and child, we were partners in playing and creating the story. Consequently, when I turned around and crashed into another human train it was not contrived, it was an intervention that was acceptable, enjoyable and contributed to the story. These connections were also observed with Exim dance artists, where children again accepted the artist as play partner rather than leading or controlling.

As a collector of stories, characters and ideas, I began to understand the role of play and how children accept adults that value their play. Trusting the children, accepting their ideas and where they take the story, then our (the adults) ideas are also accepted and integrated into the play. The project has given me, as an artist a greater insight into children's play, the building blocks they use to develop a game, tell a story and explore the world around them. Holding the image of the child as leader, activist, and storyteller we are able to create opportunities and environments that ensure her voice is heard. Our listening enables her to contribute to the planning for learning and creating as she plays. This process fosters children's and adults' confidence and enjoyment.

To conclude, working in collaboration to create the Learning and Creating workshops and the documentation which enabled us to foreground children's learning and creating. The documentation and reflections made visible children are accomplished storytellers, researchers of sound, skilled mark makers and much more. Together, parents, practitioners, students and artists, were able create places and opportunities where tiny voices are invited to grow into giant ideas. In the next article you will hear about these giant ideas.

Department for Education (DfE) (2021) *Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage* Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-foundation-stage-framework--2> [accessed 1st April 2022]

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