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Tiny voices, giant ideas

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Tiny Voices, Giant Ideas: parents, artists, practitioners, and students working with children.

Compiled by Karen Wickett

This is the final of three articles, which have explored and discussed artist involvement in early years (EY) settings. To recap in the first article Karen Wickett considered academic theory that underpin the practices when an artist is involved in an EY setting and in the second article Sarah Parsons (Early Years Lead, Green Ark Children's Centre) and Jacqueline Slade (Artistic Director Stiltskin Theatre Company) reflected on their experiences of putting the theory into practice. Together we designed and planned six Learning and Creating workshops. In this final article Chelsea, an early years (EY) practitioner, Ellie and Chantelle Early Childhood Students and parents Devon and Hannah share their experiences of working together and their reflections on their and their children's learning. We end this article with a poem inspired by the children's giant ideas written by Jacqueline.

Parents

Devon shared 'Robert has enjoyed his time exploring all of the learning opportunities. I have loved how he used the wide range of open-ended resources available and seeing his curiosity in 'movement' when throwing a range of materials. The practitioners have made the group so limitless and it's those opportunities that are important to provide young children today in age where some plastic toys can limit children's learning and creativity. I would love to see more groups like this to help communities to experience how simple resources can mean hours of endless fun and can really help a child learn and to realise that there is no limit in their potential!'

Since attending the Learning and Creating workshops Devon has started 'Play date Create', which is a group for children and families in her local area. There are lots of open-ended resources!

Hannah explained 'the sessions were really fun with lots of different ordinary items for the children to explore during free play. I think the sessions really helped to open up my son's imagination, it was a joy to see the older children leading the creative play with their own ideas. I definitely noticed my son's confidence grow through out these sessions. By the end he was joining other children in their play. The leaders were amazing at listening and seeing what the children were interested in playing with and then helping that play to continue from session to session'.

Practitioners

Chelsea stated 'this was a great opportunity for us to really think about how we were going to collect the children's stories. The Characteristics of Effective Teaching and Learning were a tool that enabled us to listen to the children and hear their stories. The documentation enabled us to notice all areas of learning and development.

I see these families regularly at the Children's Centre's family groups. It has been great to observe them in a different way and see them explore and create at the Soapbox Theatre. Over the last few weeks, I have noticed parents' confidence grow. It became easier for them to share their ideas and observations of their children's learning. This experience enabled children to come out of their shell and try new things. During this time, I have observed they were more confident to take the lead when using these open-ended resources to create stories. Also, the children were more content and

focussed on one activity. They were able to be engrossed in their learning for longer periods of time, whilst creating ways to stretch their imagination and own ideas to extend their play’.

Students

Ellie described how ‘the concept of ‘working with an artist’ was completely new to me, leaving me questioning how this would work. Instead of the artists’ role being an entertainer for the children, it became clear the artist was able to provide a much more playful context for the children’s learning and creating. Their ability join in with the children on their level and see all their ideas was incredibly beneficial. Instead of following the EYFS, the children were able to be themselves and discover their own enjoyments whilst learning and developing a range of skills. The artist acted as an ‘interested peer’ for the children to be creative with. Overtime I observed the children were confident in their own decisions and learnt that their voice is valued and heard.

When planning the sessions my understanding of documentation was based on my experiences working in a pre-school. I was motivated to find a way in which we could document learning that would genuinely represent each child’s individual creativity and learning. Eventually Chantelle and I decided to use a sort of poster/booklet layout, presenting each date with a full page of photographs, reflections and stories that the children, their parents and practitioners contributed.

This project opened my eyes to the importance of working alongside parents to build supportive and trusting relationships. I believe there is huge value in working together, rather than having one person take control. These relationships enabled everyone involved to grow in confidence, as well as provide different insights into the children’s learning experiences including those beyond the sessions at home.

Overall, this experience has hugely affected my understanding of the value of children’s voices and their abilities. It has encouraged me to want to incorporate aspects of this project into my own future practice. I will provide opportunities for children to discover their fascinations and enjoy the learning and creating process beyond the academic curriculum. Working alongside professionals without the notion of one professional holding ‘authority’ definitely pushed me in terms of developing confidence, requiring me to speak to parents and in front of small groups; which is something I would not have done previously. I have also had the opportunity to develop graduate skills, critical reflection, confidence and communication.

Chantelle shared before this project, ‘I believed that working with an artist would have involved the children sitting and doing what the artist wanted them to do, or that the artist would be the main source of “entertainment” for the day. During our zoom meetings we attended to plan the workshops, I was informed this is not how the artist would work with the children or us during our project – instead we would be working closely together to create a stimulating environment with input from the children, parents and practitioners. In the environment we could create a playful area that enabled many possibilities. The children were allowed almost free reign (as long as it wasn’t dangerous) with what they wanted to do within the space created. It was fascinating to see how the children used different materials and objects.

Throughout the experience we were documenting the children’s learning with their parents/carers. From previous experience, all documentation that I had done was recorded through something called “Tapestry”, and it was more of a tick-box compilation of photos showing what the children can do from the Development Matters (DfE, 2021). This project showed children being creative and

there wasn't any need for us to sit down with the children and ask them, for example, I'd they could count to ten. We took photos of the parent and practitioners interactions with their children and write observations of exactly what we saw and heard. After reflecting on the documentation we created books for them to take home at the end of the project. I think this was a more effective process because the parents/carers were fully involved by sharing their insights into their child's learning and photos of them being together can be rare.

This opportunity showed me new ways that I can document learning and interact with parents/caters that I am sure to use in my future practice.'

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Inspired by the children written by Jacqueline Slade, Artistic Director Stiltskin Theatre Company

We have been roaring dinosaurs, celebrity chefs, super-heroes.

We have travelled through space,

Plunged salt-dough into the depths of buckets and retrieved it as stupendous slime.

We have rolled around in cardboard cities -

Discovered dragon eggs -

Sneezed into dandelion seeds.

We have crashed, recovered and crashed again.

We have spent moments of wonder collecting treasures,

Tested strength with giant glue pots -

Exploded light and dark, ran through tunnels,

Up and down stepping-stones,

Rolled down hills -

Looked at the world through tiny holes

And taken first steps.

We have had an adventure!

Reference

Department for Education (DfE) (2021) *Development Matters Non-statutory curriculum guidance for the early years foundation stage* DfE available at:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1007446/6.7534_DfE_Development_Matters_Report_and_illustrations_web_2_.pdf [accessed 13th May 2021]