



Evaluation of the
Early Years
Foundation Stage
Creative Arts
Network (Liverpool)

August 2014

Evaluation conducted
and report written by
Jude Bird, Head of
Schools' Partnerships,
Curious Minds



Contents

Context	1
Methodology	1
Findings	2
Discussion of Findings	3
Findings	5
Discussion of Findings	6
Conclusion and Recommendations	7
References	8

Context

This three term programme was developed by Liverpool School Improvement Service and was co-funded between the Liverpool Learning Partnership and Curious Minds. The programme was launched on 7th October 2013. Six half termly practical sessions took place and nineteen early years settings were involved. As well as initiating and running the programme, the Early Years School Improvement Officer and Advanced Skills Teacher (AST), also undertook site visits to support the practitioners involved.

This evaluation took place in three of the settings, with teacher practitioners who had self selected to participate in it, thus representing approximately 20% of the cohort. The study set out to answer the two questions the practitioners themselves had also been set.

These are:-

"Can practitioner confidence in using the creative arts have an impact on the characteristics of effective learning including levels of involvement?"

"Can the Creative Arts have an impact on development in other areas such as language and personal, social and emotional development?"

Methodology

The evaluation was undertaken as a piece of Participatory Action Research. The process took the form of researcher attendance at the launch, two site visits to each of the schools involved; one early on involving timed observation of practice, and a later one towards the end of the project in which an interview took place with each of the practitioners and some support staff. A midpoint questionnaire was filled in by each of the practitioners. Meetings also took place with the Early Years School Improvement Officer and Advanced Skills Teacher to discuss initial findings.

All of the above data has been recorded in the form of field notes and the triangulated outcomes are the basis of the evaluation.

Findings

The two questions will be addressed separately; firstly practitioner confidence.

"Can practitioner confidence in using the creative arts have an impact on the characteristics of effective learning including levels of involvement?"

"Teachers' attitudes set the climate, contribute to the organisational culture of the setting, and, along a continuum, creatively support, or ignore, the child's engagement with all experiences, including the arts." (Clark and de Lautour, 2013)

All the practitioners identified a significant and positive shift in their own approaches to creative work after attending the course in question although their baselines were slightly different.

One practitioner described her practice prior to attending the initial session, "I wasn't overly confident in delivering creative activities and was quite formal in my approach. You could describe me as a one pot, one brush practitioner" (practitioner questionnaire, March '14). Another stated "Before attending the creative arts course in October I did not feel confident in delivering Expressive Art and Design (EAD) within my reception class" (practitioner questionnaire, March '14).

The practitioners cited new ideas, skills and techniques as key to their increased confidence. A development in "creative risk taking" was noted by way of offering children more time and space, options and provocations (guided choices) and risking "mess". This indicated a conceptual shift. One practitioner recalled she used to "...worry about getting paint on the floor and children getting in a mess." (Practitioner questionnaire, March '14).

This attitudinal shift has enabled the practitioners to develop "have a go" mind-sets enabling growth from initial uncertainty.

In my timed observations of classroom/outdoor creative practice I note:-

28/1/14 1.50pm The teacher (practitioner) introduces all the areas. She offers children choices of activities. Very quickly they move to their area of choice. There is a range of provocations all around the space. Some children play with musical instruments, others with play dough, others with gem craft, a group gathers around a large piece of paper on the floor. Some children are cutting card. The teacher sits with the play dough group and engages them in conversation about shape and size. A teaching assistant (TA) captures images on her iPad. The children are quietly absorbed in the activities.

2.05pm Children are still focussed on their original activities. There is an atmosphere of co-operation.

2.20pm Children start to move between groups. A few stay with their original activities. The children's actions are purposeful and they talk about what they are doing.

In another setting I observed:-

29/1/14 1.55pm A large group gather around a TA and ask for resources to make shakers. Children move between one space and another. The teacher moves to the table where the children are drawing and shows them Chinese calligraphic images. Some children go outside.

2.10pm There is constant chatter and movement in the space. The TA instructs the group on how to make a shaker out of a plastic bottle. In another corner children are arguing about who should be in the Chinese dining room. One boy quietly stacks wooden blocks, another is absorbed in making something with a plastic bottle, chocolate box and an egg box. The calligraphy group is now working on their own quietly.

2.25pm The children making shakers are concentrating closely on the activity. There is a lot of movement in and around the space as children go from one space to another, changing from one activity to another or collecting more resources. All are engaged in their own way.

Practitioners reported increased confidence to "attempt new things" and improved delivery "because I now have a wider variety of ideas and activities for the children to explore" (interview, June '14).

They have also disseminated their new learning and ideas to colleagues so the impact is being transferred and cascaded. "I share my ideas with my co-worker, the other reception teacher" and "after each session I feedback to colleagues and copy any notes and hand-outs. I have been allowed a small budget to purchase resources for the team, so we can all try out the activities with our classes" (practitioner questionnaires, March '14).

The practitioners involved felt very supported by visits from the Advanced Skills Teacher and the School Improvement Officer and they all commented on having the opportunity to observe someone else's practice and the value inherent in that. It also "helped put into perspective progress being made by myself and the children" (interview, June '14).

This increased confidence and changed practice has had the effect of increasing practitioners' own enjoyment of the work as they have seen more value in it. One reported "This year's class seem more creative because I've allowed them more freedom. They are always dancing and making things." Another felt "...the children are a lot more engaged with EAD as my teaching of it has become stronger". This "cycle of success" in the awareness of their own confidence imparting a greater quality of experience for the children, was common to all three in this study (interviews, June '14).

They also all identified they had either extended the creative space or were utilising it in a better way. In turn this had influenced their thinking, with increased emphasis on the value of process rather than "end gaining".

Discussion of Findings

In all of the settings I observed a "state of flow" Csikszentmihalyi (1996). Staff moved between groups of children engaging with them and asking questions. Children demonstrated choice making, immersion and concentration often for a substantial period of time. In some instances they were able to sustain interest and involvement in an activity for 30-40 minutes. When they did move between activities they moved seamlessly and did not disrupt an existing group, they simply joined in.

They were largely calm and focussed on what they were doing. There was a clear balance between self-choice and guided choice that created an overall coherence to the sessions.

Behaviour for learning and receptivity requires a coherence in the brain rhythms. This immersion and being in their "element" creates this coherence. Franklin (2010) observed that when the engagement and involvement is perfectly matched to the child's expertise, when the child feels ownership of the process, a feeling of exhilaration can occur that is an indication of optimal learning.

The diversity of the activities meant there was something for everyone. In one setting I noted:-

6/2/14 10.20am Four children are playing musical instruments and dancing around a table. A TA is reading to another child.

The co-existence of child-led and adult supported learning was evidenced in the same space. In this way inclusivity is promoted. Vygotsky (1978) explains that children learn by extending their zone of proximal development (ZPD). He highlights that the support of others is an integral part of the learning process, which is viewed as shared and collaborative.

Being part of the Creative Arts Network also gave a focus to the work. Early years arts specialists offered ideas and techniques, which the practitioner was able "to make my own" (interview, June 2014). Layering these skills on a half termly basis with interim support visits created a "held space" as practitioners were not working in a vacuum. They knew they would be coming back to the group to feed back and gain more skills. The structure of the course was commented upon by all three as being most valuable for the reasons explained above. The course undoubtedly has been the key to building practitioner confidence, with an appropriate structure and the selection of highly skilled artist practitioners to impart and transfer their knowledge to the group.

The equation of new skills and ideas + space and time = increased practitioner confidence has resulted in greater child engagement and "permission" for them to be more experimental and creative. In the settings observed, the staff participating in this study have collectively reported on increased levels of child involvement and enhanced concentration, co-operation, creative "risk taking", experimentation and choice making.

Confidence in staff has enabled them to offer more "open-ended" activities, this leaves room for the child to play and experiment. As Bettelheim (1969) commented in *The Children of the Dream*, "play is children's work". The 21st century needs innovators as we cannot use old solutions to solve new problems, thus encouraging children's problem solving and application of knowledge early on in their lives will set the tenet for their futures.

In essence artistic practice is a continuous presence in the everyday lives of children; it is not compartmentalised. Once skills and processes have been acquired in one area of their lives they are embodied and can be transferred to other areas. Creative practice is applicable to every area of the curriculum.

The potential impact of creative arts on language and personal, social and emotional development is considered next.

"Can the Creative Arts have an impact on development in other areas such as language and personal, social and emotional development?"

"A work of art which did not begin in emotion is not art." Paul Cezanne

Findings

"...first hand experiences and talk are the principal means of learning, where children's capacity to explore and imagine for themselves is nourished by open-ended invitations to engage with the world" (Adam, Alexander, Drummond and Moyles, 2004:81)

Statutory guidance identifies communication and language thus:-

"...development involves giving children opportunities to experience a rich language environment; to develop their confidence and skills in expressing themselves; and to speak and listen in a range of situations."

Whereas **"personal and social development involves helping children develop a positive sense of themselves, and others; to form positive relationships and develop respect for others; to develop social skills and learn how to manage their own feelings; to understand appropriate behaviour in groups; and to have confidence in their own abilities."**

Throughout my visits I witnessed teacher practitioners and support staff utilising every opportunity to engage verbally with the children during creative activities.

In my field notes of 28/1 2:05 pm I recorded.... the teacher converses with the play dough group. One child chooses red and blue colours. The teacher asks, "What football teams' colours are red and blue?" The child in question says "Chelsea is blue" and the teacher replies "And Liverpool is red".

In another setting imaginative play offered the opportunity for language.

6/2/14 10:00 In the classroom there are three girls dressed as medieval princesses. Two are riding hobbyhorses and one has a mobile phone, which she swaps for a tiara. One of the "princesses" is reading a book whilst riding her hobbyhorse and exclaims as she bumps into something "This is a dangerous place!"

Group work afforded an opportunity for collective dialogue as the children interacted with one another.

28/1 /14 2.20pm They talk with each other about the things they are doing.

29/1/14 1.45pm Some children collect shakers they have made the previous week and are asked to describe their shakers and how they have made them. They describe quite intricately the use of different types of glue for sticking different surfaces.

Teacher practitioners commented on increased memory retention and recall related to an object, for example when the children were shown a feather they remembered Polly the Parrot in a pirate story. Another identified a child with limited motor skills and visual discrimination who joined in a conversation, never having done so before, with herself and the school improvement officer. Another noted an improvement in children's vocabulary and writing especially around technical art and design terms and that they were now working from images to develop literacy. She said both their visual and written work had increased in complexity and she believed that was because they were interested and engaged (interviews, June '14).

Discussing the work of individual artists also gave rise to language as they addressed techniques the artist had used and looked at paintings that aligned with topics they were studying.

One teacher commented in her interview (June, 2014) on the progress made by children for whom English was an Additional Language (EAL), she identified shifts in their personal and social development, role play, conversational and storytelling language and that they had become more confident in taking the lead as well as being self directed. She said a lot of the activities employed had also helped with the use of phonics. Children's improved sense of chronology and sequencing has also been influenced by the work.

Relationship to self, other and others are all evidenced below as I saw children working on their own, in pairs and in groups. These form the basis of all personal, interpersonal and social relationships.

Self:- A girl wearing dress up high heels goes into the Chinese kitchen with a handful of yellow wool strands and announces into the space "here are the noodles".

Other:-Two boys are playing musical instruments and they spontaneously start to depict in movement how they think a dinosaur moves, I overhear their conversation thus.

Others:- Outside a large tarpaulin is laid on the ground and children brush, mop, jump and wheel over it with orange paint. There is an atmosphere of co-operation; they are wordlessly collaborating to create a huge work of art.

These are representative of practice I witnessed across all three settings and offer a snapshot of the ways in which personal, social and emotional development took place throughout creative arts sessions.

Discussion of Findings

"Children's wholeness, their moment-to-moment experience of the world through cognitive, linguistic, social, spiritual, physical, cultural, emotional and sensory engagement with that world, that context, that moment, are supported significantly through the arts" (Clark, Grey and Terreni, 2013)

Children's descriptive language and meaning making through image, technical language through process, collective dialogue through group working and verbal enquiry and critique through observation and questioning, have all been enhanced in the views of the staff working with them. Wright (2010) sees teachers as "interlocutors" who "service and hear the voices of children through a genuine form of enquiry and dialogic mediation".

The ability to translate a direct learning experience from one medium to another, say, visual literacy to the spoken word, hones the powers of observation, reflection, assimilation and subsequently articulation; this is a sophisticated process and has transformative potential. If working in the creative arts can achieve this then the indicative impacts are indeed significant for the development of language.

Freedom to move allowed children to break state, move from one place to another at their own pace and to work at different and changing levels, from standing, to sitting or to work at floor level. At no point throughout any of my observations of practice did I hear any child being

reprimanded by an adult nor did I witness conflict between children, only healthy discussion and debate. Freedom to move confers choice and the impetus to move is fundamental to us all. Confident, co-operative and collaborative behaviours from staff and children were in evidence and I posit that this freedom of movement is significant in contributing to these.

Children remained authentic in their involvement and even though I, a hitherto unknown adult, was watching and writing, no one "performed" for me. Such was their engagement and security within their environment.

The active engagement of staff as co-learners alongside pupils provided a community of learning. This conferred a real sense of working together and a shared experience. Where the teacher practitioner is "the guide on the side" rather than "the face in the space" a dynamic occurs which is invitational and relational, in so doing this models effective ways of inter-acting with others.

"Through independent as well as guided exploration in the early childhood and community setting, with teachers and significant others, the child will learn skills and techniques to enable them to express their own ideas better than they might on their own" (Wright, 2003)

The views of staff involved in this evaluation and my own observations are indicative of some of the impacts the work has had on children's personal, social and emotional development. This is a small-scale study however combined with the responses from the other practitioners involved I think the evidence will be substantial.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Practitioners were all keen for there to be continuity for this work beyond their own classroom practice. Suggestions ranged from a programme of visits to other former participants on the course to see how they had implemented their learning on site, to developing work with their own clusters of schools so they could continue to disseminate their learning and build an excellence of practice in the creative arts within their own locality. Another would like to involve secondary school pupils and there was a concern for the practices to filter through to the juniors in their own settings.

A joint project between children from other schools was also identified as a possible way forward.

Maintaining the significant momentum that has been generated by this course as well as embedding newly acquired practices will be key the next steps for practitioners. In order to prevent the work from becoming formulaic continuing professional development remains important. Questioning and being questioned about our own practice is what keeps us alert. The participants in this study are truly reflective practitioners who are keen to build on what they have learned and to continue to share that with others.

On the 25th June this year an announcement about early years pupil premium came from the Deputy Prime Minister's office, Nick Clegg said:

"Every child deserves the chance to fulfil their potential, and this extra funding is a boost to help our youngest children get on in life and succeed."

"Boys and girls from poorer families have often already fallen 19 months behind their better off classmates by the time they hang up their coat on the first day of school. Increasing their chances of success has got to be a top priority."

Narrowing or filling the attainment gap is an area that creative arts can do admirably in early years settings. Offering young children the opportunity to build their skills in expressive art and design, communication and language, personal, social and emotional development and exhibit the characteristics of effective learning; playing and exploring, active learning and creating and thinking critically can, as we have seen, all be done through creative arts.

Gathering a body of evidence as testimony to the efficacy of the creative arts in all of the aforementioned areas can and should be used to influence policy makers and budget holders.

References

Adams, S., Alexander, E., Drummond, F. and Moyles, J (2004) *Inside the Foundation Stage: Recreating the Reception Year*. London: Association of Teachers and Lecturers

Bettelheim, B (1969) *Children of the Dream*. London: Paladin

Bird, J (2014) *Field notes, questionnaires and interviews*

Clark, B., Grey, A. and Terreni, L (2013) *Arts in early childhood education Kia Tipu Te Wairua Toi-Fostering the Creative Spirit*. NZ: Pearson

Clark, B. and de Lautour, N (2013) *in Arts in early childhood education Kia Tipu Te Wairua Toi-Fostering the Creative Spirit*. NZ: Pearson

Csikszentmihayli, M (1996) *Creativity-Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*. NY: Harper Perennial

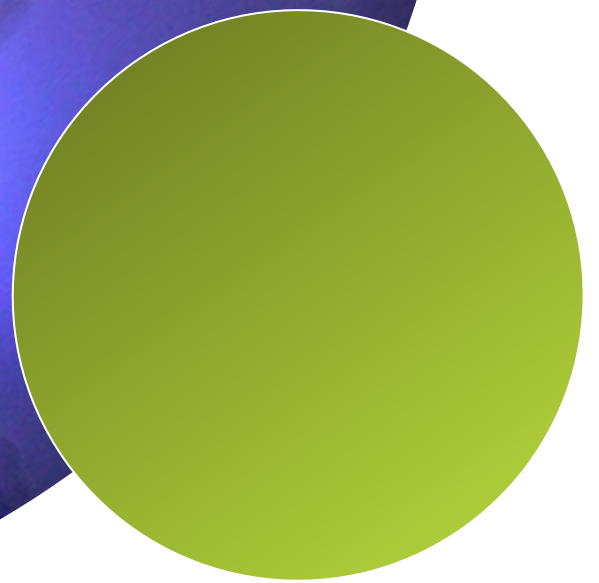
Deputy Prime Ministers Office. London (2014)

Franklin, S.S (2010) *The Psychology of happiness: A good human life*. NY: Cambridge University Press

Vygotsky, LS (1978) *Mind in Society; The development of higher psychological processes* (ed M. Cole, V. John Steiner, S. Scribner and E. Souberman). Cambridge: MA Harvard University Press

Wright (2003) *The Arts, Young Children and Learning*. Boston: MA Allyn and Bacon/Pearson Education

Wright (2010) *Understanding Creativity in early Childhood: meaning-making and children's drawings*: London: Sage



01282 435 835



info@curiousminds.org.uk



www.facebook.com/curiousminds1



[@curiousmindsnw](https://twitter.com/curiousmindsnw)

www.curiousminds.org.uk