



Building Creative Partnerships through image and text



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 4 April 2012

Received in revised form

10 December 2012

Accepted 2 January 2013

Available online 22 January 2013

Keywords:

Creativity

Young children

Artist-in-residence

Artist

ABSTRACT

This paper reports an Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Creative Partnerships project. This comprised three stages: professional development of artists and teachers at an experimental lab; artists' residencies in Foundation Stage classes; and evaluation of the experience by the artists, teachers and researchers of achievements made. An inspiration for the project was the Reggio Emilia approach of northern Italy that emphasises design and physical arrangements in space; valuing collaboration among all adults, the teacher (*educatore*), artist or art educator (*atelierista*) working together and pedagogue (*pedagogista*) who provides leadership; documentation and reflections on artistic experiences and ample support by art resources. A case study approach using multiple sites and multiple methods was adopted. Results showed relationships among creative activities, collaborative actions of artists and teachers and actions and responses of children. Multiple perspectives identified by Creative Partnership representations were seen as a means to free up the curriculum by head teachers, a form of inter-disciplinary sharing of ideas by artists and, by teachers, a complex three-way learning relationship between children, artists and teachers that was vital for children's learning. The project team created an equal partnership in negotiation, debate and reflexivity, the teacher became a learner and active participant in collaborative art practices in which children appeared to be developing autonomy and other modes of thinking. The aspiration was longer-term change in understanding of learning, knowledge and skill acquisition within the community of learners.

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1. Introduction

This paper focuses on partnerships between EYFS classroom teachers and creative external partners. First, it involved artists and teachers working collectively and collaboratively in an experimental lab to create a core team and used a wide range of art forms to stimulate on-the-job learning. The experimental lab was a stimulating learning environment constructed collectively and collaboratively by artists and teachers to allow children's exploration through touch, smell, sound as well as sight, of all its aspects – forms and meanings to be found in natural, industrial and found materials. Professional knowledge, skills and experiences were then developed through artists' residencies. Finally, professional practice of artists and teachers was developed through the promotion of investigation, documentation and reflection.

An influential report, *All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education* published by the National Advisory Committee for Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE, 1999), emphasised the importance of enabling children and young people to become educated in cultural and creative aspects of the curriculum that extended beyond what was called 'creative arts' and argued the case for bringing creative and cultural education into primary and secondary schools. The following

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year, Gerry Robinson, the Chairman of the Arts Council, England enlarged upon this in his idea of a 'creative entitlement' that would ensure that no child left primary school without the opportunity of a direct experience of the professional arts. He proposed a new national initiative that brought together arts colleges and organisations, artists, entrepreneurs and schools in a collaboration that could change the quality of both education and the arts (Robinson, 2000). The proposal from the Arts Council, England, submitted to the Cabinet Office and the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) was followed by an announcement of the *Creative Partnerships* initiative to construct new ways of promoting and celebrating the value of the arts in the lives of school-aged young people. A government Green Paper *Culture and Creativity the Next Ten Years* (DCMS, 2001), set out a vision for increased opportunities for all children to develop creative skills and stressed the importance of schools engaging with creative professionals, particularly where there was no existing tradition of such work.

Creative Partnerships were launched initially between 2002 and 2004 in sixteen areas of multiple deprivation. Around twenty-five schools (primary, secondary and special) in each were selected by the Arts Council, England in consultation with local Creative Directors. In 2003, there was further expansion into twenty new areas. By 2004, the DCMS, Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the Arts Council England strengthened policy and delivery for *Creative Partnerships*, with the following aim to:

Foster effective, sustainable partnerships between school and the widest possible range of cultural and creative professionals, in order to deliver high-quality cultural and creative opportunities for young people to develop their learning, both across and beyond the formal curriculum. (DCMS, 2001, p. 5)

Whilst there was widespread recognition of the benefits to accrue from partnerships between artists and arts education in schools, there was less guidance available on how to create an active partnership and monitor its effectiveness. Ann Orfali (2004) was commissioned by Arts Council England, North East to provide best practice guidelines for commissioning practice and effective partnerships for artists working in schools. She identified and examined the expertise required to create an enriched curriculum, innovative teaching and learning styles. To do this, she investigated principles of quality partnerships from the perspectives of artist, school, commissioner and pupil. She concluded that such a curriculum provides a means to protect children from risk of social exclusion, and to raise achievement, self-esteem and awareness of cultural diversity. Key findings of the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) evaluation of *Creative Partnerships* were more cautious about the benefits. The evaluation concluded that *Creative Partnerships* had moved quickly into implementation and cross-curricular projects involving true partnership working had a real potential to make a difference to schools (Sharp et al., 2006). Most commonly reported outcomes for young people in case study schools were associated with creativity, personal development and communication. Compared with similar young people nationally, young people who attended *Creative Partnership* activities were reported to have made similar or slightly better progress in their national curriculum assessments. Compared with other young people in the same schools, those known to have attended *Creative Partnership* activities performed slightly better at all three key stages.

2. Background to the project

Whilst the focus of the *Creative Partnerships* initiative was on primary, secondary and special schools, and sixth-form colleges, an enterprising local authority Creative Director working in a West Midlands city decided to extend this by engaging a core team of artists, theatre companies, musicians, multi-media artists and creative industries to work with early years practitioners of children of three to five years in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), Department of Children, Schools and Families (DCSF, 2007; Department for Education, 2012).

This core team worked together to create a model of collective, collaborative and reflective learning by building an interactive experimental laboratory that stimulated creativity and attempted to link across areas of learning. The intention was to embed research training in this enterprise, to enable EYFS practitioners to explore particular research questions related to this experience in more depth in their own EYFS settings. The inspiration for the project was the Reggio Emilia approach of Northern Italy. Reggio Emilia is a small town where the provision for children under six has become world-renowned for its system of co-operative and active learning involving community, parents and groups of children, a teacher (or *educatore*) and art educator (or *atelierista*) with input from a pedagogical co-ordinator (or *pedagogista*). Together they support curriculum development, communication and provocation in a workshop context (or *atelier*) where analysis of children's 'visual languages', the processes of learning and interconnections between their ideas, activities and representations are explored (Edwards, Gandini and Foreman, (1998).

The project promoted a culture of investigation, documentation and reflection by artists, teachers and local Creative Partnerships commissioners and then researched by the authors of this paper. It sought to improve teaching practice, develop professional and personal knowledge, skills, experiences and understanding, and help generate the confidence and competence of EYFS practitioners to discover, evolve and model a style of working that might influence future practice. It valued new learning and the capacity to model this to others. Prior to starting the project and as part of their professional development, the team of artists and teachers attended both a UK study week and a symposium on *Children and Spaces* in Reggio Emilia, Italy.

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