

‘Hop Skip and Jump’ project collaborations: the arts in early childhood education

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This article explores the Expressive Arts and Design (EAD) area of learning and development of the revised Early Years Foundation Stage framework (EYFS 2012) in England. It presents and shares the story of a series of art events and activities with children in a collaborative project. The importance of young children experiencing opportunities to develop their creativity through the arts and a range of multimodal experiences is promoted. This is demonstrated through the project ‘Hop Skip and Jump’ with the artist in residence who describes the process of collaborating within a school with staff, children and parents. This project included providing the community art gallery to represent the arts in education as another level of collaboration for the community and the next phase with staff from the University of East London.

Keywords: Arts in Education; collaboration; community; creativity; expressive arts and design.

Rationale for expressive arts and design

The importance of practitioner creativity can be established and reviewed through reflective practice and dialogue. In order to be creative and express oneself, the opportunity to explore and engage one’s imagination is essential. In this way, all adults, whether parents or educators, can create the conditions to support young children’s expressive identities through a range of media and creative activities. The arts offer many ways for us to learn from, engage and identify with our communities (NACCCE 1999). Hope (2004: 70) highlights in planning experiences in design and technology, that for Foundation Stage children, opportunities for free exploration of materials and

techniques are essential to allow children to be in charge of their own learning and to make their own connections from one area of learning to another. Foundation Stage teachers need to clearly articulate the importance of child-initiated learning of process rather than product and of the way in which such experimentation contributes towards children’s knowledge of material properties and mechanical systems.

In my own research (Martin 2005, 2013) children in reception classes were able to write narratives about their stories and draw their lived experiences that represented their thinking and knowledge about their friendships and friends they played with and what they wanted to express about their experiences and emotions. The children were able to combine their drawing and writing to represent their worlds and use creative expressions including how they designed their pictures and chose colours and movements to express characterisation and personalities in the drawings. My research concurs with the argument that drawing can provide the tools for thinking, modelling and communicating ideas, concepts, understanding and emotion (Hope 2008: 174–5).

Transformations

Research studies have revealed that young children’s drawing is part of their playful, meaningful and multi-modal engagement with the world (Ring 2010: 115). The concept of being playful has been promoted by many educationalists (Bruce 1991, 2001; Pahl 1999; Broadhead 2004; Wood & Attfield 2005; Moyles 2010) as essential to children’s learning and involves the capacity to imagine, dream, to consider different ways to be, for example, in role play. Children can be given opportunities to solve problems and have ideas that can be taken forward in their play or shown by symbolic representations such as mark making,

drawing and painting. To transform ways of constructing, designing and imagining the 'what if' is part of this creative thinking through expressive arts and design experiences. The transformation of materials in play and experimentation can be made visible by the resources and materials being made available for children to access and use independently and collectively. Creating the conditions for children to express themselves involves practitioners in understanding the ways children use the environment to 'transform' and revisit ideas and possibilities that are meaningful to the children, and so in this way they are developing their ways of being and knowing, which is a creative process.

In imaginative play, children can transform people – for example the child who changed the construction model they had made from a robot to a dinosaur! This was all achieved through model-making materials that the child selected and made from a variety of natural and junk resources. The creation of three-dimensional objects is an important progression in children's art and design capability. Children have to hold in mind a picture or thinking through it as part of the process of designing and constructing forms and models that are created entirely by the child, thus making real something that they have imagined (Duffy 2006). Time, open-ended materials that can be 'transformed' by being used in different ways, for 'possibility thinking' and creative physical spaces, are necessary to support children's design and creative abilities, and that type of learning space can enable their use within it.

Link to characteristics of effective learning

The 2012 Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework identifies characteristics of effective teaching and learning. In planning and guiding children's activities, practitioners must reflect on the different ways that children learn, and reflect these in their practice. Three characteristics of effective teaching and learning are playing and exploring when children investigate and experience things, and 'have a go' based on children's motivation; active learning where children concentrate and keep on trying if they encounter difficulties, and enjoy achievements; and creating and thinking critically where children have and develop their

own ideas, make links between ideas and develop strategies for doing things (DfE 2012: 6–7).

Expressive arts and design (EAD) enables all these characteristics to be present, with practitioners being able to formulate how children will be able to engage and learn in these ways. EAD in the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE 2012) is one of the four specific areas of learning and development, and this reflects the possible connections to other aspects of all the other areas. This can be made relevant in how practitioners plan for children's play and opportunities to be motivated and enable the children to construct their own learning and become critical and creative learners with confidence. By understanding the role of imagination and creativity in young children's development the learning environment can be designed to support an early years pedagogy that provides considered and relevant intervention by the adults to support the child in their process of learning. In the project outlined below by Victoria Hussain it is relevant because observational drawing can also be an opportunity for concentration and refinement of the hand-and-eye coordination required in the technical and designing of forms, whether they are representations of the imagination or the reality of the objects being drawn. Children can be supported by the educator facilitating observation in a variety of ways, by following the children's interests and allowing time, and documenting the children's work through a variety of visual media with text. We can understand the process of creating the conditions for children's holistic development and learning through collaborative projects such as Hop Skip and Jump.

The artist in school: case study and process

I (Victoria Hussain) am an artist at Greyfriars Art Space (GAS) in King's Lynn, Norfolk, where I have a studio and am co-coordinator of this artist-led not-for-profit organisation. I worked as a teacher for many years, initially trained in Secondary Art and Design at Goldsmiths, University of London. I retrained for Key Stages 1 and 2 of the National Curriculum when I moved to Norfolk. While working in schools I became interested in the way children move in and around the school and playground, in groups and individually, how they interact with adults and each other.

In 2014, Greyfriars Art Space hosted 'Circles', an exhibition of children's work from King's Lynn Nursery School, with Roz Downey working with GAS artist Inge-Lise Greaves. A favourite piece of mixed media work by the children consisted of Smarties stuck on a canvas after Damien Hirst's dot pictures referring to modern art and circles – just one of a series of witty artist/child collaborations. Their short exhibition hosted at GAS was a success and inspired me to make contact with Highgate Infant School, King's Lynn, with my Hop Skip and Jump project. I wanted to develop the idea of a 'pop-up' exhibition of my work – bronze sculptures of movement and play – to tour schools from Norfolk to London, with a package of workshops and artist interactions with the children at each show.

I made contact with my host schools (many of which I had worked with during my time as a supply teacher) and galleries, asking if they would host an exhibition.



Figure 1 Exhibition flyer

The first stage of this process was to approach the head teacher Mrs Roberts at Highgate Infant School to ask permission to access the school and playground to simply sketch and take notes to inform my own work. I was allowed to sketch in the classrooms and on the school field during sports day and playtime, and in the playground of the Edwardian building. Access to all areas was made possible and I was able to sketch the children, which they loved. In the field I was honoured with daisy chains and I was mobbed in the playground, all the children wanting me to draw them, but they soon lost interest and just got on with playtime. By the end of the five drawing sessions, I was finding my swing marks and quick drawing note taking. As an observer, the interaction of adults and children in the room fascinated me. These observation days were spread out during June and July 2014.

Sculpture, 'art week' 'Movement and play'

While at the school I brought in some bronze sculpture wax, projected drawings for the children at an assembly, letting them feel and manipulate the wax, and gave them an artist talk aimed at four- to seven-year-olds. Letting them manipulate and pass round balls of wax helped, and they loved spotting themselves in the sketches, which to me was pleasing because often I had only managed to take down a pigtail or a leg line. I was happy to take part in the school's 'art week' 'Movement and play', a carousel of activities organised by the Year 2 teacher Miss O'Neill. Each teacher taught a discipline: sculpture, painting, drawing with charcoal, ICT. My 'bit' was to enable the children to do large gestural pen-and-ink drawings on A1 pieces of paper. The children worked in groups of four on circular tables, sometimes collaborating with each other (the sports field drawings), other times working independently on the same page (the large girl sideways skipping).

I asked the children to choose the playground or the field where they had recently had a sports day, to draw themselves playing and moving. The drawings demonstrated a lot of hopscotch letters, Victorian railings and a caterpillar that I think is painted on the playground come-up. The running lines from the field on sports day and the cones are mapped out as aerial view. There were no tops or bottoms to the drawing because the children had just pitched in on a circular table.

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Miss O'Neill took the sculpture group, showing them images of movement and a few of Degas ballerinas that a lot of the children picked up on in making their sculptures with clay. Mrs Asif worked on A5 paper with her class of 30 at a time, taking the children carefully through the stages of drawing a figure with arms and legs (joined and in movement), arranging their composition (landscape) and carefully mixing paint to fill the correct areas with the correct colour. The results ranged from very careful compositions to a lively brushed pool of red paint. All were included in a 'patchwork quilts' display at the exhibition at GAS and later at the school. The children's work was exhibited for four days at the Greyfriars Art Space with the voluntary help of fellow Art Space Coordinator Kathy Cossins and Emma Langley from Highgate Infant School staff.

Community gallery exhibition

The exhibition was visited by people walking into the gallery from the street, artists, the local community and parents. Mrs O'Neill's class visited and put their artists' signatures on a piece of paper on the wall over the three days. I kept the gallery open until 5.30pm rather than 4pm to enable parents to visit after school with their children. The exhibition was attended by the children from Highgate, to see their own work together with some of my sketches. The next step is my collaboration with Estelle Martin, Senior Lecturer Early Childhood Studies in the Cass School of Education and Communities at the University of East London. This includes this article about the process of the artist in residence and arts in education, and promotion of an exhibition of this first stage of Hop Skip and Jump which will be exhibited in the gallery space at the Cass School of Education from May for five weeks. Students, staff and children in communities will be able to visit the exhibition space. The future is that I will be presenting myself for the touring of the pop-up show of my sculpture to schools and art spaces across the country. The idea is to arrive and turn a hall or classroom (at any educational level) into an art space and conduct talks and workshops (or to include the wider school community, depending on location). The pop-up exhibition can last as long as a day or a week. My sculpture and interaction hopefully will leave the school with its own professional exhibition and display. I am thinking about documentation: little catalogues from each

school, using pen and ink, modelling and so on. This also introduces children to art galleries and art spaces, which for many is not something they will experience in childhood.

Conclusion

Collaboration across communities of practice can bring together the sharing of ideas and resources. Children can participate at several levels as creative learners and artists in their own right in addition to co-constructing their representations within a group with their peers and with adults. Artists in residence can facilitate collaborations between staff and parents and promote a community for sharing representations and ideas. The role of the artist in education also shows how careful and considered documentation is part of the process from initial creative ideas from the children and through to the display of their representations both in the indoor classroom and the outdoor environment to the community art gallery. This case study has also demonstrated the place of arts in education crossing boundaries to create new collaborations and understandings between children, parents, teachers and researchers and a sense of place for arts in the community.

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