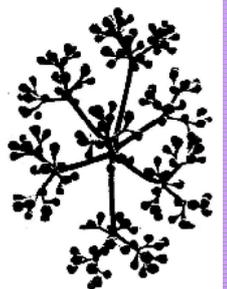


The Magic Wardrobe

Evaluation

SureStart
West Gate



SightLines Initiative

The Magic Wardrobe

Evaluation

Introduction and Background	2
Principles informing the project.....	2
Aims and Objectives of the Project.....	3
Environment and Organisation.....	3
The Project Host.....	3
The Physical Environment	3
Organisation -sessions/timetable/groupings/ staffing.....	5
Reflecting on the Experience.....	5
Methodology.....	5
Key Elements.....	5
The Effects for the Children.....	6
Overarching effects of project participation.....	13
Adults' learning and experiences.....	19
Freedom and Autonomy	19
Developing reflective practice.....	19
Perceptions of the child.....	19
Environment and materials.....	20
Facilitating adults.....	20
Knowing children better.....	21
Sharing the experience.....	21
SureStart quantitative criteria.....	22
The future – the project as an instrument for change.....	22
Achievements.....	22
Questions.....	23
Conclusion and Recommendations.....	24



Hope creates an image on the screen, and Asa dances slowly in front of it

Introduction and Background

The Magic Wardrobe Project was a response to the recognition of the importance of creativity in developing and nurturing the whole child. The Sure Start Westgate team wished to enhance the creative provision made for young children within their area. The Magic Wardrobe offered children in Westgate the opportunity to experience and develop creative opportunities.

Sightlines Initiative, an educational charity committed to developing creative early years practice, was commissioned to facilitate the project.

Principles informing the project

Sightlines Initiative advocates and promotes a creative approach to learning through the development of projects which are responsive and reflective, encouraging children to think and act creatively within a supportive setting. Artists and educators are encouraged to work as nurturers and guides to facilitate the children's experiences, observing closely, listening to the children's views and hypotheses and teaching skills where needed to enable the children to develop their ideas.

The Magic Wardrobe project drew upon an earlier work of Sightlines Initiative, *The Fantastic Attic*, a four week creative event for pre-school children which was held in the Discovery Museum, Newcastle, in June 2000. Arts-enablers, experienced in the early years, worked alongside children and educators, helping children to explore, exchange and develop their ideas and understandings.

The ethos - the competent child

The inspiration for the project came from the approach taken in the infant-toddler centres and pre-schools in Reggio Emilia, Northern Italy. The early years educational provision of Reggio reflects a view of children as strong, rich and competent learners with the right to an environment and experiences that reflect these beliefs. Within these establishments an artist, (atelierista) is employed as a full staff member to work with the children on projects, (progettazione) in order to develop powers of hypothesis, communication, exploration, perception and invention -to develop creative thinking.

The DfES Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage describes creativity as "fundamental to successful learning". Creativity is regarded not as a separate mental faculty, but 'a characteristic of our way of thinking, knowing and making choices.' (Edwards et al 1998 p.75)

Creativity is often described as the three p's – a person involved in a process, which results in a product - but within the early years, a more appropriate description is offered by Bernadette Duffy:
Creativity can be said to occur when children

Explore and experiment
Use language and play to make sense of the world
Concentrate on a single task for a long period
Bring order out of chaos and do something new with the old and familiar
Use repetition to learn something new.
(Bernadette Duffy 1998)

Creativity is characterised in the early years by curiosity, exploration and the connecting of ideas in the play and daily experiences of young children.
The Magic Wardrobe project aimed to afford children opportunities to develop these valuable aspects of their lives.

Aims and Objectives of the Project

The aims and objectives of the project were identified as follows :

To provide a permanent focus for exploration and imagination, working with and for pre-school age children, their educators and their families.

The project aims to change the perception of children as receivers and to value them as creative innovators and independent thinkers.

The project is to be a focus for and a generator of ideas.

Aims

to recognise and nurture creativity
to develop creative initiatives with under fives
to provide advocacy for creative learning
to value individuality and difference
to develop self esteem and respect for others

Objectives

for children - to provide an opportunity for children to explore, to imagine, to create, and to share ideas

for teachers - to provide professional development for teachers through training and active participation with artists focusing on the child as inventor, and creative thinker

for artists - to provide professional development for artists focusing on the role of the artist as facilitator and enabler working with teachers to encourage children to think and work creatively

for families - to provide an opportunity for parents to understand the reflective approach which values the child's viewpoint.

Environment and Organisation

The Project Host

'Children's creativity develops most productively within a rich learning environment supported by interventions of sensitive and responsive adults.' (Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage)

The Magic Wardrobe project was hosted by Nunsmoor Playcentre.

The playcentre - a single story building sited in a residential area of West Newcastle, on the edge of parkland, with a dedicated woodland space and playground attached - offers out of school provision for local children aged five to fourteen years, and hosts holiday playschemes. The centre is staffed by a team of playworkers.

The 'learning environment' of the project comprised the following elements.

The Physical Environment

The play centre was transformed to provide spaces which permitted exploration and discovery.

The different areas within the space were organised so that they were gradually revealed to the enquiring child, passing through archways, drapes, going into twilight spaces, negotiating narrow dark tunnels, entering a prism of a hundred reflections.

The space offered the following areas:

Foyer - a white space with mirror prism, soft textiles, drapes and stairs. Space for exploring natural materials.

Documentation area displaying pictures, projections and descriptions of the children's experiences, with transcriptions of the children's words.

A making area offering materials for graphic representation, modelling, construction

A central area for meeting, reflection and exchange

A dark tunnel area with adjoining room

A dressing up space

A dark room with light box, overhead projector, shadow screen.

Outside, a woodland environment.



Materials

The space was richly resourced with materials which were non-prescriptive. Materials and objects which permitted open-ended exploration and application. The children adapted them to serve their own particular purposes.

There were no 'toys'. The materials were 'real' things that the children could test themselves by using, developing new skills or refining existing ones eg climbing step ladders, using plumbing equipment and water, making constructions with masking tape and string.

Facilitating adults

The role of the adults within the project was to work alongside the children, supporting them in sharing and developing their own ideas and understandings. Through close observation and considered interventions the adults provided children with opportunities to explore and extend their own ideas and interests, and to have them valued.

"Children will learn to respond , explore, express, communicate their ideas and use imagination when they have sufficient time to explore and research their ideas, imitate what they see, experiment with ideas and bring their own ideas to the process.
 (Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage)

Organisation -sessions/timetable/groupings/ staffing

The project operated for a four week period, four days per week, offering sessions to nursery classes from two local primary schools, Westgate Road Primary School and Moorside Community Primary School. One day per week the project was accessed by local Parent and toddler groups- Westgate Road Baptist Church, Baby Social, the Angelou Centre and Ma Bacche.

	a.m.	p.m.
Monday	Moorside Primary School	Westgate Hill Primary School
Tuesday	Moorside Primary School	Westgate Primary School
Wednesday	Parent and Toddlers WRBC/Baby Social	Parent and Toddlers Angelou Centre/ Ma Bache
Thursday	Moorside Primary School	Westgate Hill Primary School

The groupings permitted full-time children from Westgate Hill School Two sessions per week for four weeks, the part-time children 1 session per week for four weeks.

The children from Moorside School attended for three sessions per week.
The nursery class session times were 9.30am –11.30 and 1.30 –3.15.
The parent /toddler group sessions 9.30-11.30 and 1.00 – 2.30

Staffing

The sessions were staffed by two artists and one playworker recruited from the playcentre to provide a link with the local community.

The project staff were employed from 9am to 5pm, permitting non-contact time for evaluation, discussion and exchange on a daily basis, and to permit the production of documentation.

Additionally artist mentees and teacher training students from Northumbria University observed the sessions and provided additional support.

Lead in period

In order to develop understanding of the project and secure commitment from participating groups, Sightlines hosted the following initiatives.

Presentation to participating staff and target groups – Westgate Road Baptist Church
Second presentation to participating staff and target groups – The Parks, Cruddas Park
Meeting with Project Host Staff, Nunsmoor Playcentre
Information Packs re. project aims and objectives available to participants.

Reflecting on the Experience

Methodology

The methodology of this evaluation drew upon the following sources in order to produce as complete a picture as possible of the project.

Documentation of the children's experiences produced by artists, educators, project staff and teacher training students

Interviews of host staff, educators, artists, mentees, and a sample of parents of participating children.

Discussions within the project team.

Key Elements

The following elements emerged as significant in the course of the evaluation process.

- Effects of the Magic Wardrobe project for the children involved
- Overarching effects of project participation
- Adults' learning and experiences.
- The future -The Magic Wardrobe Project as an instrument for change
- Participant groups -evaluating the criteria for participants
- Challenges
- Conclusion and recommendations

The Effects for the Children

There was unanimous agreement from the adults that the project approach enabled children to explore and then communicate their own ideas and understandings. Children were described further as developing in confidence and self-esteem, taking charge of their own learning, and demonstrating great capacities for focus and engagement.

The following areas characterise the experiences of the children, and will be illustrated by examples and commentary. Each section has examples of observations of children from the 'preschoolers' and 'babies & toddlers' groups.

- Exploration
- Developing Relationships
- Research and Investigation
- Imagination

Exploration

Key element: Provision of appropriate/interesting and relevant resources

Preschoolers: Danny – Moorside Nursery



Danny has moved to this country recently from Croatia, and his family are Romany gypsies. He has settled well at nursery but displays few spoken language skills in Croatian, Romany or English. Throughout his visits Danny was attracted to the Over head projector. In his initial exploration he sat quietly choosing objects (shells/feathers/gems etc.) and placing them on the OHP. He observed the shadows he made with the objects on the screen. He also chose an acetate picture, placed it on the OHP and observed the image on the wall.

Later in the session Danny moved back to the Over head projector. He chose an acetate picture of stars and placed it on the OHP, next he chose a shell and placed that on the picture, he was very careful to observe the shadow on the screen. The shell was round and it wobbled, Danny observed the shell wobbling and the shadow wobbling. He was fascinated. He did this over and over again.

As Danny was placing the objects he also noticed the shadow made by his hands. He moved his hands to move the shadow. He was absorbed in this for several few minutes.

When Danny came for his second session he went directly to the OHP and placed his hands on the glass to secure his place. There were lots of children in this area. Danny said, "Paper" and "No" to some of the other children. He cleared the screen of all the bits and began choosing and placing objects. He was absorbed in this activity on his own for 10 minutes. Danny did not keep piling on more and more things as many others did. He worked carefully and moved objects around until he was happy with the image.



He carefully observed his creation and stopped when it was finished. He looked very satisfied with the result. Danny was proud and said "look" to Emma.

unusual and exciting environment.

Danny seemed delighted to be in this space and beamed throughout all the sessions.

As the project progressed Danny became more confident and began expressing himself using simple language. ("Look", "No Rivva", "Mine", "More water", "Look hands", "eyes".) His teachers observed that in this environment he was using language more than ever before. We discussed that because he was so interested and engaged, he was inspired to use language to communicate his needs and desires.

Having the same resources available during each session enabled Danny to have a continuity of experience so that he was able to resume his previous activity with the OHP and pick up his half started imaginings and shape them into something tangible.



Babies and Toddlers: Hope's explorations with torch

By the time Hope visits the Magic Wardrobe for the third time she has found her feet. She confidently moves through the space, selecting things to explore and exchange with others. She goes into the dark tunnels and finds a torch. Hope is interested in this new object, she examines it with great purpose, looking into the beam of light, shining it on things, mouthing and chewing it.. She carries it around for the whole morning, unwilling to relinquish it. It is her fascination, she comes to know what a torch can do, what it feels like, smells like, tastes like; she knows everything that she can about torches by home time.



For Hope this curious new object provided a stimulus whose worth cannot be measured in terms of creative opportunities. The freedom afforded her to use all her senses and to pursue her explorations throughout the space without restriction or constraint enabled her to examine and investigate the essence of 'torchness'. Could this environment provide her with the possibility of making fundamental connections of mathematical, scientific and physical nature that she had not discovered within her playgroup's box of safe, plastic toys.?

Babies & toddlers: Oscar and the convex mirror

Oscar is interested in the convex mirror. He is testing it, prodding it, leaning on it, and finally stamping with his foot. He causes it to pop, turning from convex to concave. This development intrigues him.. He turns it over to repeat the process, stamping on it, turning it from convex to concave, then back again. "Oops, I fell off!" He is standing on the mirror, sliding down the slippery sides in his stockinged feet. He kneels by the mirror, leaning into it, watching his convex reflection till the mirror pops and inverts.

Oscar conducts a thorough exploration of the convex mirror, a new object he has not come across before. He is intrigued, and by manipulating the mirror with his hands and feet discovers its curious properties. All the while his discoveries are made visible to him, his actions reflected in the mirror which he is closely watching.

Developing Relationships

Key elements: time; children experiencing autonomy; atmosphere and physical spaces

Preschoolers: Zahra – Moorside nursery

Zahra is a quiet and observant child, who often played on her own in a solitary way, rarely interacting with others.

During one of her visits Zahra chose to be in the outdoor area. Many of the other children were engaged in painting the fences using pots of water and big brushes. Zahra was attracted to this activity, but rather than interacting with the others she carried the small step-ladder, water and brushes over to the fence on the far side of the area away from the others.



Zahra climbed the ladder and began by painting the very top of the fence. She then moved on to paint the middle of the fence.

Next she moved down to paint the bottom of the fence. She displayed absolute concentration in this activity and was not distracted from her task. She worked thoroughly and carefully (so as not to miss out any bits) and completely on her own for 15 minutes.

Zahra continued painting and as she did so she heard some children over the other side singing. She stopped her painting and sat on the ladders and observed the other children singing and painting. She joined in with the singing quietly on her own and from a distance. It was interesting that she came out of her solitary activity and carefully watched her peer group interacting together.

What was she thinking?

This thoughtful period was a significant moment for Zahra because during this time (as her next actions indicated) she had made a conscious decision to try and join in with the others. Nursery staff were interested to see Zahra behave in this unusual way and eagerly observed her following actions.

Next Zahra put down her pot and began trying to move the ladder. She tried to lift it but it was too heavy so she tried to push and pull the ladder across the grass.



It was a struggle for her and her teacher was desperate to help her. Emma suggested that they should not intervene yet as she was managing by herself and seemed determined.

She managed to get the ladder over to the other side by herself and propped it up against the wall.

Next she ran back as fast as she could to get her pot of water.

When she returned she tried to put the ladder up properly (in the moving it had folded) but she couldn't do it.

Zahra stepped on the ladder tentatively testing if it was stable, she climbed up and back down again, twice.

She knew it was not quite right

At this point she looked over to the adults for some help.

The teacher responded and went to assist Zahra in putting the ladder up properly. There were a few children still playing in this area and Zahra made a momentous decision to offer her pot of water to Saume and Mawada. The teacher commented on how significant this was for Zahra to positively choose to interact with her peers and engage in sharing.

After the session we discussed that the project had inspired children to enter into sharing and negotiating resources and materials. It seemed to be the high level of motivation and interest which inspired them to do this.

It was significant that the children were sharing and negotiating independently of adults and were perfectly able to manage this themselves. We discussed the image of the child as rich and competent and how this level of competence must not be undermined but rather given the opportunity to develop.

Freedom from adult agendas, time, space and intensity of meaningful and creative activity enabled Zahra, observed generally as 'solitary' and verbally non-communicative, to talk and express herself directly to adults and to make a decision to interact and share in a communal activity with her peers. The significance and value of such an enabling ethos should not be underestimated in developing children's social competencies and confidence.

Babies and Toddlers: Gabriel

In the mirror prism, Gabriel lies on the fleece, gazing at his reflection. He is joined by another baby, together they lie quietly in mutual investigation of the mirror babies they see all around them in the prism. Later Gabriel is joined by his mother who cradles him, and supports him in his watchful activity.



Parent and toddler group participation highlighted the importance of establishing trusting relationships, not only with the children, but their parents.

In order for parents to relinquish control and entrust their children to unfamiliar adults in an unusual and surprising environment trusting relationships are a necessity.

The Magic Wardrobe project created an environment where relationships could develop. The physical environment and time and space permitted very young children opportunities to be alone, with their carers, or with their peers.

Research and Investigation

Key elements: provision of interesting and significant resources, time , space and autonomy

Preschoolers: Parves - Westgate Hill Nursery

Parves was observed at the light table. He was interested in using the acetate pens on the light table. First he drew a picture on acetate. Next he took a leaf shape and drew around it onto another piece of acetate.

Parves could not fit the whole shape onto the acetate and he looked concerned about this. He moved the leaf shape along so that he could draw the stem on the sheet.

He then took the acetate picture and placed it on the over head projector. He looked at the enlarged image on the screen. He went back to the light table and picked up the leaf shape and held it up against the projected image. Parves was engrossed in discovering the possibilities of the light projector. His discoveries inspired many of the other children who began tracing shapes on the light table, enlarging them on the OHP and observing the difference.



The complete absence of adult agendas that usually guide children's investigations enabled Parves to follow his own path, and make the connections that were meaningful and significant to him. He was able to ask his own questions and find his own answers.

Babies & toddlers: Zoe and stairs

Zoe is fascinated by the stairs placed against one of the walls. She climbs up and down, up and down, experimenting with different ways of ascending and descending. She uses alternate feet, same foot, hands and feet, hands and knees, bumping down on her bottom.



She is loving this, climbing stairs is a favourite occupation of hers at home.

She is joined by Oscar, together they go up and down, up and down, carefully passing each other. Absorbed in this common interest.

Together on the top step they pull the curtains across to hide from view.



Zoe is able to explore this interest of hers, she is focused and absorbed, tests herself, explores and discovers more about going up and down, and enjoys the process enormously. She is trusted to make these explorations and continues with them until she has satisfied herself. After this investigation of hers she is relaxed and content, she lies in the mirror prism watching her reflection, happy and still.



Zoe's absorption in, and prolonged investigation of the opportunities offered to her by the stairs, illustrate vividly the value of allowing young children freedom to explore their own interests thoroughly and intensely. The two children's mutual connectedness in their parallel activity of 'stair research' engaged them in physical inquiry of a fundamental nature.

Imagination

Key Elements: time, space, and provision of non-prescriptive materials

Preschoolers: Leon – Moorside Nursery



In the second week of the project a large mosquito net was added to the main space. Leon was playing in the main space. He found a small bell on a chain. He began ringing the bell.

"It's church time" and rang the bell.

"C'mon everybody come in the church" he stood in front of the mosquito net and held open the entrance. After a while the children responded and entered the church. Leon said to them, "When I ring the bell you must sit down, that's what you have to do in church right." The other children sat down.

"Right, calm down, don't shout and be sensible right" he told them.

When they were all sitting quietly he said, "Now, we should all sing – lets sing, 'cobbler, cobbler mend my shoe'."

Leon began singing and the others joined and sang with him.

Leon's imagination was inspired by the simple props in the space. This simplicity meant that it could be whatever he wanted it to be. Therefore he was able to express himself, follow his own ideas through and interact with his friends.

He seemed to enjoy the powerful role he created for himself.

Leon's teachers said that he didn't actually attend a church. The nursery class teacher commented that she recognised some of his language as her own.



Simple, thoughtfully furnished spaces enable the children to engage their imaginations and create their own role play situations. This led the project staff to understand that less is more in terms of props as it allows the children to fully engage their imaginations.

Babies and Toddlers :Andrew exploring light



Andrew sits by the overhead projector, his back to the screen, arranging and rearranging wooden eggs, nuggets and feathers on the plate. He is enjoying exploring the objects that are brightly illuminated, oblivious to the beautiful image that he is creating.

He is happy and relaxed in this new, twilit space. He offers a shell from his arrangement to C., then an empty jar, making a conversational exchange, smiling. He sits back, then moves away from the projector. Now Andrew is attracted to the screen by the moving images that C creates, enormous feathers sweep across from side to side. Andrew gets closer to the screen, reaches out and touches the feathers. C. moves the shadow feather over his hand "Tickle, tickle."

Andrew rubs his hand and laughs delightedly at this imaginary tickling.

Overarching effects of project participation

The following effects were observed over the course of the project. They will be illustrated by example and commentary.

- Risk-taking
- Use of space and materials
- Language and expression

Risk-taking

Key elements: Respecting children as competent

The project was underpinned by the understanding that children are competent and capable, and that their capacities are to be respected by the adults working alongside them. The environment within the project and the facilitating approach of the adults permitted the children to demonstrate this competence.

The children were allowed opportunities to test themselves in challenging situations and apply common sense. They were able to face problems and uncertainties and seek a resolution for themselves. The adults permitted them the time and space to take risks, learn through trial and error, and find their own solutions. Solutions were not immediately provided by the adults. Rather, by working closely and attentively with small groups, the children were able to reach out and extend their knowledge and understanding supported by the adults. The children were also permitted opportunities to test themselves physically, learning to use equipment and materials that were outside their normal experience – with the expectation that they were competent and able. Being able to manage independently and take responsibility for themselves fosters confidence and self esteem in the children. They experience autonomy and become more powerful as a result.

Preschoolers: Megan and the ladders

The children are working outside in the wooded area, amongst the trees, using ladders, water and brushes to paint the fence.

Megan begins by exploring the water in the tray with Ranim, but keeps a watchful eye on the ladder that Tiffany is using. As Tiffany climbs down and leaves, Megan claims the ladder for her own. She finds a pot, fills it with water, and begins to paint the fence. She is enjoying using the ladder, slowly at first, but gaining in confidence, climbing up and down, shifting the ladder along and painting enthusiastically. She stands on her toes, reaching high to paint further up the fence post. She asks Ranim "That's better, in it?"



She climbs to the next step, stretching further, "Look, I can reach there."
Megan decides that she needs to climb higher still. She shifts the pot of water to the ground so that she can climb onto the platform at the top of the ladder. A fine rain is falling, the ladder is wet and becoming slippery.

Megan tests the steps, and climbs more slowly and carefully, finding her footing at the top. "I'm really big, high up, and down the higher!" She is very pleased to have climbed so high and enjoys the vantage point, looking through the fence to the park beyond. She sings to herself as she climbs steadily up and down, painting.

Megan has understood that she needs to take care in climbing the ladder. She feels confident enough to carry on without requesting help from the adults who are close at hand, ready to respond. Taking responsibility for herself and managing independently seems to contribute to her sense of achievement, as she climbs and paints.

When children are able to develop a sense of mastery, take responsibility and persist with difficulty and uncertainty they are developing positive capacities, positive 'habits of mind' that may contribute to the growth of learning dispositions.

Babies and Toddlers: Scala

Scala is in the dark room, working at the overhead projector. She looks around and sees something on the shelves that she needs. The jar of glass nuggets is out of her reach. She looks around and finds a blue box full of treasure. She snaps the lid shut and moves the box across to the wall. Carefully she steps onto the box and reaches up to the jar. She takes it down and returns to the overhead projector, looking very pleased with herself, continuing her work making images.

Use of space and materials.

Key elements: time, facilitating adults, open ended activity within non prescriptive environment. Less is more

Within the space the materials available to the children were non-prescriptive, materials and objects which permitted open-ended exploration and application. The children adapted them to serve their own particular purposes.

This is demonstrated by the episodes where the 'surprising environments' that were offered to the children were often used by them to enact their familiar domestic routines, Asa creating a bedroom in the construction area, the overhead projector used as a tea table, the mirror prism made into a house for the children's role play.

The environment was shaped by the facilitating approach of the adults. The children were afforded the freedom to explore materials in their own way without the weight of adult agendas or expectations.. . Materials were offered that were easy to manage, masking tape, sharp scissors, removing the element of frustration i.e. blunt scissors.

Other equipment offered elements of challenge –step ladders to be negotiated and moved, plumbing equipment to be connected and used.

Filling and pouring

Naseem is working by the ladder which has pipes and guttering attached to it. He is engaged in pouring water into the system of pipes, using a beaker which he regularly replenishes. He is not interested in the progress of the water, this filling and pouring is the focus of his interest.

Finally the reservoir of water is empty, Naseem gestures that he needs more water. C. offers to fill up the bucket, and leaves Naseem by the pipes.

Filling the large bucket is time-consuming, other children offer to help, and assist in carrying the heavy bucket back outside.

In the meantime it has begun to rain a little. Ann asks Naseem if he would like to go inside, but he refuses, staying by the pipes, beaker in hand, "No, I'm wait."

This is an important job that Naseem needs to complete.

The filling resumes, Naseem is having difficulty because the connector has become dislodged and is causing the water to spill out. K shows Naseem how to turn the connector to succeed in his purpose.

Naseem continues "I got it here. I'm not finished."

The space ,time and materials in the outdoor environment afford Naseem exciting new possibilities to explore. He is committed to the work he has chosen for himself and is able to develop new skills and understandings.

Babies and Toddlers; Oscar and fruit picking

Oscar is enjoying a feast of fruit – exploring the tray of sliced pineapple, limes and satsumas – touching, smelling then tasting the citrus fruits. He especially loves the pineapple slices, tipping his head back, taking big bites.

Next he turns his attention to the trestle strung with limes. He methodically slides the limes down the strings and drops them to the floor, one strand at a time.

His grandmother makes a connection watching Oscar busily engaged in this activity. Oscar has been fruit-picking before, it seems he is drawing upon his previous experience and 'picking' the limes.



Oscar is able to make connections with his previous experiences through his exploration of delicious and succulent objects. He assimilates his earlier experiences and engages in symbolic play. Sessions with toddlers and their carers reveal the importance of making connections. New understandings emerge as previous experiences are shared, helping us to understand children better, providing insights into their actions. These contributions are immensely valuable.

Language and Expression

Key elements: absorption in activity and expectations and time.

Within the project, children were encouraged to explore their environment and express themselves through many languages or modes of expression – including words, movement, drawing, painting, sculpture, shadow play, collage and music. By allowing the many voices of children to come through and children's different ways of expressing themselves to be revealed, all children were given a voice. The children were listened to as individuals and this had the potential to impact favourably on their self-esteem and view of themselves as learners.

The emphasis on non-verbal expression meant that the approach was particularly useful in focusing upon the interests and fascinations of very young children without spoken language.

Preschoolers: Huma and the curry – Westgate Hill Nursery class.

Huma has decided to stay indoors and play with the clay. Other children come and go at their free will, spending a few minutes with the clay. Huma stays very focussed on the clay. Huma had stuck feathers and shells in the clay

I asked Huma "what she is making" she replies "making outside". She paused "Look" she said touching and blowing the feathers, "it's moving because it's windy".

Huma spent majority of her time on the table making clay models. She is later joined by Umar, by now the clay is very sticky and wet. Huma is having a conversation with Umar in their mother tongue. She is offering him something to eat. Umar ask her "what are you making" she replies and says "curry".

"Would you like some"? Umar replies and says "yes" Parveen was sitting nearby. Umar looks up and questions Huma, "can Parveen understand what we are saying"? She replies and says "yes, stupid she is a Pakistani". Their school teacher joins in the discussion and asked Huma "what are you making?" Huma and Umar both looked at each other, their faces mischievous and Huma replies, "Ms It's a mess!"



Laloona joins her at the table and presents her with a bunch of flowers. "It's for you", Huma replies and says "that's lovely".

Huma has come and sat alone on the table. She wants to make a picture from all the materials that are on the table. It's a car she wants to draw. Huma has drawn a car on a sheet of paper, next she looks around to see what else she could use to make her car.

Huma chooses to use shells as the wheels; she has used a leaf for the body of the car. Huma has used her imagination and the junk very creatively to make her car. She was pleased with her work

Later on in group discussion Huma tells the other children about her car and explains, "It's broke, It has to go to be mended".

The children seem to have a strategy to safeguard their privacy. They understand that they can offer a version of events to adults who possess or do not possess an understanding of their first language. Other children in the group have chosen their words and language to achieve this effect.

Mohamed - Westgate Hill Primary School

The first few times that Mohamed visited the Magic Wardrobe he seemed to notice a lot but say very little. He seemed to understand what was going on and looked content. His teachers informed the project staff that they were not sure how much English language he had grasped at school and that his mother spoke little English. He was very quiet and passive but he seemed comfortable. As the project progressed and Mohamed was becoming familiar with the environment he also became more confident and active and less passive. He began making his own decisions about what he wanted to do, rather than following the group.

When the outside area was opened for the children Mohamed was absorbed in various activities outside. His behaviour changed dramatically as he became animated and very active.

Many of the children were using pots and big brushes to paint the fence with water. Mohamed was also attracted to this activity. He found a pot of water and brush and rather than painting the fence he began painting the cardboard tube structure. He was totally absorbed in this for the whole session



Mohamed ran out of water in his pot he said to Mostafa, "get it in there" holding out the pot. Mohamed and Mostafa went over to Emma who asked them what they needed, "water – in there " said Mohamed and handed Emma the pot. Emma and the boys went inside to get some more water. On their way back out they found some coloured eggs on the grass, they picked them up, Mohamed put his in the water "look" he said to his friend and Mostafa copied him. They carried on painting and James came over to join in. Mohamed was chatting to his friends. The teachers were surprised to see how verbal he was., they were interested to see him interacting with others in a more confident way and observed him to see how this would develop.



He said to James, "I'm painting in there". He was beaming with enjoyment. He offered to swap brushes with James and they did. There was lots of chatting, swapping, sharing and negotiating going on between these boys. They were totally engaged in the activity.

When it was time to go Emma told Mohamed and he said "No!" and carried on, "I like this" he said. Emma explained that he would be able to continue next time and in the end he said "okay".

He took his brush and put it inside the structure and then carefully lay down the eggs beside it, "leave it there" he said. To finish the session the whole group sat together and were asked what they had spent their time doing. It was an opportunity to share experiences and reflect. Many of the children were forthcoming with information, but Mohamed was not. Emma asked him "Do you want to tell the others what you've been doing " and Mohamed said "yes" but he couldn't say it. After this Emma spoke to him on his own and asked him if he had

enjoyed himself and asked what he had been doing "yes" he said "I was painting". It seemed obvious at this point that he had felt uncomfortable talking in a big group. In this session Mohamed displayed a good grasp of English language

In the next session Mohamed picked up where he had left off. He began by painting the tubes again. Some small water sprays were introduced and Mohamed had to have one. He was busy spraying every thing in sight including his friends.



When the water ran out he tried to find a way to fill it up again. He tried pouring water over it from a jug then he tried pouring water directly up the spout and then submerging it but that didn't work either. He approached Emma and said, "Gone – more water – me".

Emma showed him how to unscrew the top and after this there was no stopping him. Each time the spray was empty he filled it up again by himself. He also showed his friends how to do this.



He sprayed the structure ,the fences, the plastic ,the logs and children and staff. He thought it was great fun and laughed a lot.

After this session the Nursery staff and project staff met to discuss the impact of the project on the children. Mrs Prudhoe expressed that Mohamed was displaying much more confidence in the classroom and was much more active and involved in group work. She also commented that they were surprised by how good his English language skills were and that he seemed more confident about using it since his visits to the Magic Wardrobe.

In an environment where Mohamed could pursue his own interests, busy and absorbed, and therefore not self conscious, he could communicate quite easily using English. This engagement and level of interest in his activities also seemed to provide the impetus for him to communicate more freely.

Adults' learning and experiences

The comments in this section describe the extent to which those involved developed their understanding of the approach, and reflected upon their involvement and practice with children. This section also includes comments from parents of babies and toddlers.

- Freedom & autonomy
- Developing reflective practice
- Perceptions of the child
- Environment and materials
- Facilitating adults
- Sharing the experience

Freedom and Autonomy

Within the groups of adults involved in the project, there was consensus with regard to the value of the project for the children. The freedom and autonomy afforded the children was seen as a positive opportunity. Parveen- playworker "The children had opportunities to explore, freedom and space. The kids absolutely loved it."

Emma- artist "The control over what they wanted to do in this space and it was remarkable how well they responded to this level of freedom. They were perfectly able to make choices, form learning groups, communicate their ideas, negotiate, resolve conflicts and problem solve."

Angela- nursery nurse. "The magic wardrobe had been a valuable experience for the children. It was wonderful for the children to be able to express themselves and make decisions for themselves without too much adult intervention."

Barbara- "It was an environment where children could be themselves, and make decisions for themselves.

Barbara recognised the importance of a learning environment where children could develop their own ideas and understandings as very positive. This autonomous behaviour resulted in very meaningful experiences for the children.

"What they did had a purpose, which isn't always the case."

Leslie- teacher "The opportunity for children to follow their own interests, to be in control of their own play and learning and not work towards predictable outcomes really gave the children the chance to be themselves. Overall the project had unlocked the brightness and competence of some of the children who had not blossomed in the nursery."

Ann -playworker "The ones who couldn't cope with routines in the classroom could control themselves better."

Emma- artist "The nature of the space allowed the children to make their own choices, negotiate with their friends and be in control of their own learning. The adults maintained a low intervention level; observing and supporting rather than leading the children."

Developing reflective practice

Involvement in the project led those involved to evaluate the creative opportunities normally afforded their children.

Leslie- teacher "The sustained opportunity for creative expression offered by the Magic Wardrobe was something I was not enabling enough in the nursery. The project reminded me of the importance and value of creative development which I feel I need to address in my own practice."

The project was seen as an exemplar of child-initiated activity and learning. Creating such a learning environment "is possible, it can be done, and it's amazing" Barbara- Sure Start.

The project showed Ann that it was possible to do things in a different way, within the constraints of health and safety regulations. She described seeing the possibilities, learning to be relaxed and not saying no because of health and safety as some of the lessons that she had learned.

Creating an environment with more challenge was also seen by Ann as being a positive outcome of involvement in the project.

Leslie-teacher "I would like some follow up work done in the nursery, an artist in residence to provide support, ideas and inspiration towards developing creative practice."

Perceptions of the child

Involvement in the project led the adults involved to see children as more capable and competent.

Parveen -playworker ""We didn't have any toys, but they still played with everything. They used their imagination to make things, they made whatever they wanted out of the things. It's amazing what they can do."

Parents noticed children able to be more self-reliant within the project.

Fiona- parent " ...he loves having adult attention, but at other times he was self reliant and really left me alone during the sessions, it was interesting for me just being able to watch him in this way."

Angela nursery nurse "I was amazed to see how fascinated and inventive they were."

Environment and materials

The environment and the materials that were available to the children. were identified as strengths of the project Working with ladders, big brushes, real things and open-ended materials was felt to be very positive. Even cellotape and masking tape were often 'like gold dust' in nursery settings. The opportunity to work outside in a freer way and on a larger more expansive scale was also felt to be a benefit to the children.

The project also enabled staff to look afresh at the materials and resources that best supported children in developing creative thinking.

Suzanne- teacher "The children had new opportunities, using the overhead projector which they wouldn't normally have at this age, they really enjoyed it. And it gave us new ideas about resources. Like the carpet tubes, I would never have dreamed that they would have done so much with carpet tubes. "

Parveen- playworker "Giving the toddlers fruit and vegetables to explore, using all their senses and touching, I would never have thought of that."

The setting that the babies and toddlers normally inhabited was a large open space in a church hall, divided into bays, with playthings and toys normally available in playgroups.

The Magic Wardrobe space was recognised as being a very different kind of environment.

Roz- parent "The environment was imaginative with great use of space – hidden corners, illusions, light and dark, cosy .I personally was over whelmed how much there was – it felt a very rich experience, colours, textures, abundance. Original and inspiring. "

Fiona- parent "There were some wonderful opportunities and ideas that I wouldn't have thought of, as a parent or teacher, that have added to my sense of possibilities for very young children. I thought the environment was stimulating and challenging – the materials provided them with opportunities they would not have encountered before."

Isabel- playleader There were no toys, it reminds me of when my two were little, I had to lock the cupboard so they wouldn't always get the pans out."

Neill -artist mentee ""Watching the children I became aware of how important both the environment and the materials within it were for the stimulation of the child's imagination. The children would go in search of something or somewhere that would could help foster their desire to respond creatively to the world. On every occasion the child's investigation was the result of their particular response to a place or object."

Facilitating adults

The adults commented favourably on the effects of adopting a more facilitating approach The autonomous nature of the project was seen as being very positive for the children

Barbara -Sure Start "They were able to express themselves in different ways, go along with what they wanted to do."

Fiona- parent "I liked that children were allowed to take risks, for example, using the torches, playing with glass pebbles , wondering through dark cardboard tunnels, use of the overhead projector. Managing risk for children is difficult, and at the Magic Wardrobe they managed it very well."

Neill -artist mentee "I learned that it was not satisfactory for the adults, no matter how considered their Inion to make their own decisions about the direction of the investigations the children were making. The ideal situation was for the children to feel able to demand things of the adults who, in turn, would enable them to realise their goals."

The children were seen as the decision-makers.

Fiona- parent " The decision- making was left to the children, that was excellent.

Back at nursery some children increased in confidence and were more interested in pursuing their own agenda.

Suzanne- teacher "We didn't do any planning because the children took that responsibility."

The parents commented upon the roles that the adults in the project adopted, noticing the more facilitating approach.

Fiona- parent "The artist input was obvious with the emphasis on the creative through exploration and self expression, rather than toddler groups/ nursery emphasis on guided learning."

Roz -parent "The artists were good at showing the adults the creative aspects – enabling us to communicate this to the kids."

Fiona- parent "On one occasion two teacher training students were there, and they allowed Asa to dictate the play and supported him without altering his agenda, and that was really important for Asa, he was really focussed"

Knowing children better

The freedom from adult agendas meant that the children had time and space to reveal different sides of their personalities. The staff came to know the children better.

Suzanne- teacher "Because of the lack of structure we saw different sides to them, especially the quieter ones who really came out of themselves .It brought a lot of them out, and it's really good for them to be able to express themselves."

Angela- nursery nurse "As the project progressed I began to see some of the children behaving in different ways. I noticed the timid children becoming more confident in this type of environment , the quiet children were attempting language more, and one aggressive child began negotiating with adults and children, we'd never seen this before."

Sharing the experience

The children's experiences and creative explorations were seen as something that could profitably be shared with parents

Suzanne –teacher "We would really like to have an exhibition, and share it with the parents, they would love it. It's all about valuing the child and the child's voice."



SureStart quantitative criteria

The target group was identified in the original project brief as pre-school children under five years of age. Within the geographical area of Sure Start Westgate North, two early years settings were identified –Moorside Primary School, and Westgate Hill Primary School. The nursery children attending each establishment were the target participant group.

Within the area, active Parent -Toddler groups were identified, and invited to participate in the project. Westgate road Baptist Church, Baby Social, Angelou Centre, Ma Bacche.

Group	4 sessions attended	3 sessions attended	Total
All Children	70	28	98
Sure Start Target Group	26	18	44

Because the project was held during the summer term in order to maximise the opportunities to develop creative work in an outdoor environment, many of the nursery children had already celebrated their fourth birthdays and so fell outside the age criteria of the Sure Start target group.

Whilst the parent toddler groups were all geographically located within the Sure Start Westgate area, the participating children were drawn from a wider geographical area, and so not all of them were within the target postcode area.

The catchment area and the target group of children were very specifically identified. However, children not meeting this target criteria meet the target criteria of New Deal for Communities who have co-funded the Magic Wardrobe project.

The future – the project as an instrument for change

Achievements

This section focuses on the effects of the project in developing reflective approaches to teaching and learning, developing a more inventive use of space and time, and an understanding of the value of learning environments which give children a voice.

The children were highly engaged and active. They 'owned' the project well, and brought parents to visit.

The project has served as an exemplar, and has had a positive impact on the participating groups.

- Westgate Hill Primary School are seeking advice from Sightlines Initiative on developing their outdoor play area. The staff wish to incorporate elements of the Magic Wardrobe environment and approach in developing this area.
- Moorside School have expressed an interest in participating in the 'Creative Foundation', a Sightlines Initiative project which promotes creative opportunities for children through long-term collaborations between children, artists and educators.
- The Friends of Nunsmoor expressed interest in inviting Sightlines Initiative to participate in the consultation process re. the development of the new playcentre building being managed by Project N.E.
- Positive outcomes for speech and language development have been observed. e.g. children with English as a second language becoming more vocal, revealing and developing their language capacities. Children talking more about their experiences and discoveries, and developing wider vocabulary as a result of working in an environment and with materials and 'not labelled' activities outside their normal experiences. The teaching staff in both schools have commented upon this aspect of the project. This development reflects anecdotal evidence gathered from the Creative Thinking In Action projects over three years of positive outcomes for speech and language development in children.
- The Magic Wardrobe project was very favourably received by the Parent and Toddler Groups who attended the sessions. Parents from Westgate Road Baptist Church are interested in developing ideas from the Magic Wardrobe to enhance the provision in their home setting. Parents valued the documentation from the project and the understandings of their children's learning and experiences that were revealed.

Questions

Impact on the host group

During the construction period – the 'get-in week' - the centre reduced the number of sessions available to the local children, and offered the outside area as an alternative venue. During the 'get-out' week similar restrictions occurred, whilst the environment was dismantled and the playcentre was prepared to host the summer play scheme.

It was originally assumed that the Magic Wardrobe space would be used by the under fives, and that the children who normally used the centre as an out of school club would use the foyer space and the outside area.

In the event however, the Magic Wardrobe space was a resource available for the older children aged five to fourteen.

Logistics

Having the project co-exist alongside existing provision caused some difficulties.

Lack of a dedicated space for reflection and the production of documentation meant that the after school provision and the project work had to be accommodated in one area. This had implications for time spent in preparing the space for the centre children and managing discussion time. Playcentre staff felt that the preparation was not always completed on time to provide for the after school children.

Playcentre staff whilst working as Community Assistants were inevitably drawn into the normal life of the centre which resumed after project hours, and so time for evaluation, documentation and discussion was effectively reduced.

A dedicated space could improve performance in these areas in future.

How to engage Sure Start families

The question of how to encourage families to use resources that are on their doorstep emerged as a result of running the project.

The limited take-up of the project by parent and toddler groups raises the issue of how to engage with Sure Start target families, and how to reach children earlier, not when they are a 'captive group' in the nursery classroom and three years have already elapsed in which support could have been provided.

It seems that further Community Development Projects to reach out to groups such as Baby Social might be usefully developed.

Securing commitment to the project

Engaging with Sure Start staff and securing commitment to the project and the Reggio Approach.

The project revealed the importance of a sustained lead-in period and preparation for participation in the project, with the Playworkers and the Sure Start team. Resourcing this preparation period adequately seems important in terms of best developing understanding and ownership of the project. This raises issues around communication, team involvement, and information-sharing.

Ownership

The genesis of the project has implications for its development. The initial interest, commitment to developing creative opportunities and funding all came from Sure Start, not from the participating projects.

The project developed without an original impetus from the participants. By the time the project work came to be understood and valued, time had been lost in developing commitment in terms of time and effort to make the learning visible.

A clearer understanding of the aims of the project, and what participation involves would enable staff to work more effectively from the outset of the project. A process which involved greater consultation and dissemination would provide more significant opportunities for those groups to feel engaged and secure commitment to the project.

Developing Understandings

The logistics of the project – accompanying children to and from the centre -meant that it was difficult to always find time to fully evaluate each session with the educators. "It was difficult to share understandings because of the limited time available." This was felt to be limiting the possibilities of fully developing the children's interests. Systems to share observations with educators and monitor the development of the children's interests back in their own setting –phone, post, email- would help to resolve this difficulty.

Barbara described the weakness of the project as failing to fully develop understanding of the project aims and values in the parents. She suggested that providing more information could have developed better understanding and secured a greater commitment to the project from the parents. This, however was described as a problem common to other projects run by the Sure Start team.

Conclusion and Recommendations

- It is significant that all of the adults commented positively on the outcomes for the children who participated in the Magic Wardrobe project. Without exception, the children were described as having benefited from the experience of having opportunities to explore, imagine, create and share their ideas.
- Working collaboratively with artists helped educators to reflect on their practice and see the benefits of adopting a more facilitating approach. In some instances children were perceived as being more competent and capable than was previously imagined.
- Parent/Carers were able to see their children's learning made visible through documentation and visits to the project. This aspect of the project served to emphasise the benefits to the children of having their individual voice heard and valued by adults and peers.
- New insights into children's learning emerged from the collaboration between artists and educators. The documentation generated by the project might be used to disseminate further the positive outcomes for children of working in a creative learning environment. The possibility of an exhibition of the children's work or a publication would enable this to occur.

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SureStart works in the West Gate area of Newcastle with children under four and their families. We aim to improve the health and wellbeing of families and children before and from birth, so children are ready to thrive when they go to school.

SightLines Initiative is a charitable trust supporting creative thinking and practice in early childhood services in North - East England and across the UK.

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