IMAGINING AND CREATING

STORIES OF PRACTICE BY THE TAKE ART EARLY YEARS TEAM

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IMAGINATION is usually defined as the ability to bring to mind things that are not present or real. It is the ability to combine past experiences and feelings with possibilities into new, hypothetical situations. It is prompted by the 'what if' questions that help children:

- to gather experience and knowledge about the world through prediction and testing,
- to better understand other people's viewpoints,
- to explore solutions to problems,
- to create and engage with the arts in story, drama, dance, music and visual imagery.

Past experience and knowledge provide a source for imagination, to make predictions, and connections.

CREATIVITY is the process of putting imaginative ideas to work. In other words, imagination is the mind-based thinking, of envisioning what could be, but creativity is making imaginative ideas take shape in some way. Creativity combines children's imagination, their knowledge and abilities, with the environments – the spaces, things and people - that enable their creativity. Young children may need some help with creativity if they are to make their imaginative ideas happen.

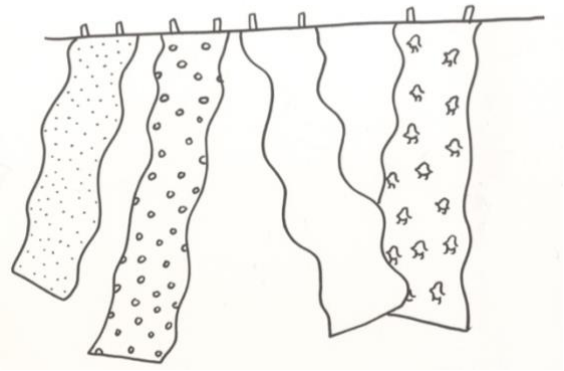
These stories of practice told by the Take Art Early Years team, Rich, Victoria, Jasmine and Jane, reveal how they sought to promote imagination and creativity among the children they worked with. What we provide for children, the resources and situations, and how we engage with children can support their imaginative abilities and creativity – or may, unintentionally, inhibit them. The Take Art Early Years team conceptualise imagination and creativity as interwoven in - and interdependent with - dynamic contexts that include the immediate things, people and types of spaces, together with the wider cultural and social contexts.

FLAPPING AND WRAPPING

THE CAR WASH AND THE CHRYSALIS

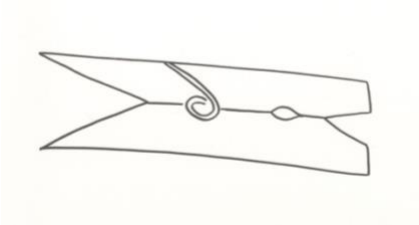
THE PRACTICE STORY

We put up some washing lines made of string and we pegged scarves onto them. They were scarves that we bought from charity shops: scarves of many colours, some with polka dots and pictures of birds. The scarves are long enough to drape, nearly touching the ground. It was a windy day. So very quickly, with a few inexpensive resources, we were able to transform a dull front yard space outside the nursery into an inviting play space.



The children walked through the scarves, weaving back and forth, exploring how the scarves felt on their faces and arms. They noticed how they came in and out of sight, sometimes hidden by the scarves, sometimes visible.

As the children moved in and out of the scarves, one boy said ‘we’re in a car wash’. We guess he would have experienced being in a car going through a car wash and the hanging, flapping scarves reminded him of it. His idea was taken up by other children and they developed it, moving through the scarves ‘as if’ in a car wash.



Rich explained, ‘pegging the scarves got me thinking about pegs and how they're neatly designed little machines. It takes the children a while to work out which end to squeeze and how it opens to clip on. Sometimes I explained it to them and also demonstrated. Then, suddenly the children can operate this little device. They spend a lot of time pegging things’.

THE CHRYSALIS

Not all the scarves were pegged up on the line. Other scarves were in a pile on the ground for the children to explore and play with. There were some big wooden pegs. Some of the children were wrapping themselves in the scarves. Then one girl wanted to wrap herself in the material and peg it up so that she was enclosed.

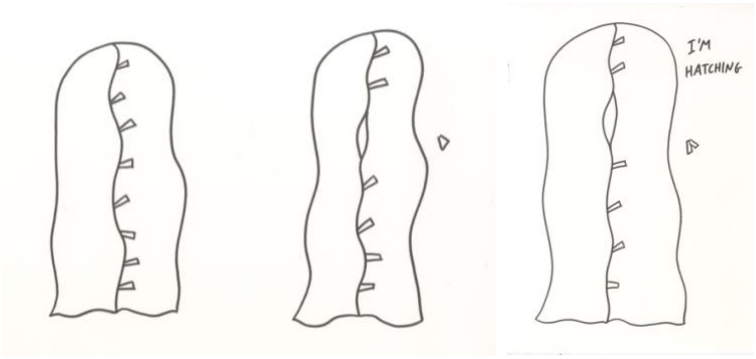
> Once she was pegged in, she announced, ‘I’m not ready’.
>
> ‘I'm not ready’.
>
> ‘I'm not ready’.
>
> Another child was peeking through some gaps in the wrapped-around scarf.
>
> Again, she said, ‘I'm not ready yet’.
>
> Then ‘I'm hatching, I'm hatching’, and one peg popped off. The scarf-wrapped chrysalis opened a little.
>
> Another child was watching attentively as little by little the chrysalis opened.

Victoria explained, ‘whatever the girl had heard and seen about butterflies, you could see that she knew it was a slow process. After she had emerged, she slowly and delicately flapped her arms, circling around the space. “I'm A butterfly”’. The idea inspired other children to make their own chrysalises, to hatch out and fly like butterflies’.

The children bring their existing knowledge into their play - of butterflies and car washes - these natural and mechanical workings. There is artistic beauty in the small dance-dramas of moving through the flapping fabric of the imaginary car wash and of a butterfly hatching and flitting away.

With imagination the children stepped into other worlds, inside the car wash or a chrysalis, out of the reality of here and now. In their mind’s eye they visualise and wonder how it might be. Children share their imaginative ideas with other children who join them in play-dancing the car wash or hatching butterflies. They often declare pretend ideas: ‘we’re in a car wash’; ‘I’m hatching’. They usually have a baseline, initiating idea – a car wash, a chrysalis - that they then develop and act out, and the idea may morph into new ideas.

Pretending is the most open-ended of all creative play activities. The mind that is primed to find free associations, to create from scarves and pegs, is ready to tackle new ideas. Fantasy play opens the mind and is a resource for future learning and creating.



ADULT ROLE

The contribution of the adults is to offer freedom with guidance. The adult is watching, trying to understand the children’s intentions and take them seriously. Victoria gently holds back another child who wants to unpeg the chrysalis too hastily, so that the butterfly-child can fulfil her intention to emerge slowly. Victoria joins in and flies as a butterfly. She then helps other children find scarves and pegs to also wrap themselves up.

Supporting children in their imaginative and creative play may also involve showing, demonstrating and teaching them skills that the adult recognises they need to fulfil their creative intentions. Rich shows and explains how to use the pegs.

THEORY

Funds Of Knowledge

Children’s everyday experiences – of a car wash, or of butterflies – can provide the source ideas that then take the children to a new level of thinking, feeling, imagining and creating. The greatest learning can result from children playing with their everyday experiences or ‘funds of knowledge’ as it is sometimes referred to. Something in the resources connects with these memories of a car wash, of a chrysalis, and what they have

found particularly fascinating will show in their play – the flip-flap quality of the suspended car wash fabrics, the complete wrapping and then gradual emergence, the inside to outside, of a hatching butterfly. Recognising children's funds of knowledge is particularly important in pedagogies which aim to be culturally responsive.

Transformation

Imagination combined with creative process enables the children to transform everyday items into something else that becomes part of pretend play, often with narrative. The items provided for imaginative play by the Take Art team were unstructured enough to have potential for transformative play, yet had properties and qualities – in this practice story, of flapping and wrapping – that could take the children's play in certain directions.

PRACTICAL TIPS

- Put the string washing line quite high, out of the children's reach so that they can't grab it, to try and pull it down.
- Provide big wooden, colourful pegs
- Expect to demonstrate and explain how to operate the pegs

CONNECTING AND BUILDING

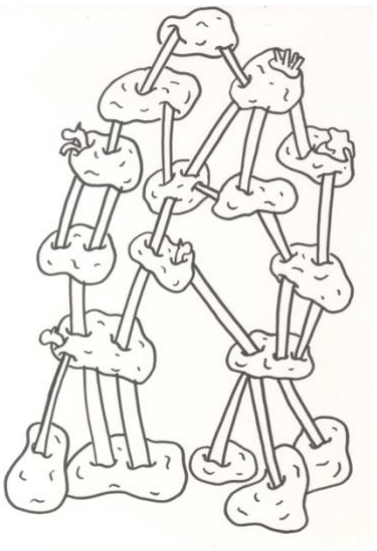
THE EIFFEL TOWER

THE PRACTICE STORY

Rich says, 'I think it's always, isn't it, about leaving your expectations at the door?'

We were in the outside area with two small square, child-height tables, and a big lump of grey clay on each table. The children were pushing lots of sticks into the clay. Suddenly they stopped, looked and it had become an incredible looking structure. It was a tower.

We talked about towers and structures and I suggested it would be good if we had a picture of a tower. So one of the staff printed out a picture of the Eiffel Tower from the computer. Then, ready, for the next session I printed many pictures of different types of tower from all around the world and functional towers like water towers, gasometers, pylons - for the children to look at and talk about.



Victoria pointed out to Rich that he asked questions to encourage the children in their clay and stick constructions: 'oh, look, what do you see?' and 'I wonder how high it goes?'. And he makes statements to encourage their problem-solving when building such as, 'yeah, that looks secure' and 'that looks strong'.

The clay and sticks tower was left out and more things from other play areas such as little plastic figures and animals, were pushed into the tower.

ADULT ROLE

The adults observed the clay and sticks play. Showing and expressing genuine interest, and enthusiasm for what the children are doing is important in encouraging them to be confident in their ideas and to continue. This is much more than simple praise but communicates via gaze, gesture and small comments a genuine shared attention and interest for what the children are doing.

The adult must 'leave their expectations at the door' and have no predetermined ideas for what the children might do with resources. They are constantly asking themselves what do the children have in mind? Then they make 'on the hoof' decisions as to what support to provide. They may need to ask questions to understand the children's ambitions. It is not about standing back. It may mean quick decisions to re-direct in some way, most obviously if there is some hazard or harm, but also quick decisions to guide in some way if the children's intentions may be better achieved by some small adjustment or by the adult actively helping, particularly with construction.

Adults can also help children stand back, look and reflect on what they have made. The adult can offer ideas: 'it's a tower'. Adults try to extend speculative thinking into things that children have not yet experienced: how high can this clay and sticks tower become; what does the Eiffel tower look like?

Sometimes adults are afraid to contribute suggestions. They worry that they are usurping the children's own ideas, but creative making is a two-way process of give and take. Adults can bring other examples of constructions or objects to extend the children's thinking about towers and tall structures. The children's ideas are developed with increasing complexity and related to images of towers in the wider world. The tower was original for the children, on their terms, but they looked at pictures of towers that are original in artists' and engineers' terms, expanding the children's horizons.

THEORY

FROEBEL: STICKS AND PEAS

Froebel pedagogy includes what are known as Occupations. These are particular play resources that are designed to promote exploration and thinking. One of the occupations, 'sticks and peas', is intended for children to explore line, shape and space. The sticks and peas are usually quite small – literally peas, or sometimes small playdough balls - and are played with individually. The clay and sticks are bigger and chunkier and usually several children collaborate to construct, but they also offer the opportunity to explore line, shape and space.

Problem Solving

Reasoning is part of the creative process. Without reasoning children cannot work out why something may not work, or imagine how it could be better. Reasoning is part of the exploration of possibilities. Adults can help children with the process of reasoning: 'what would happen if?'

Gert Biesta: World Centred Education

Gert Biesta talks of 'world centred' education by which he means bringing the children into contact with a wider world and learning to accommodate and adjust their ideas so that they can, as he says, 'exist in the world in a grown-up way'. Although his work is philosophical and concerned with educational theory, Biesta has written about arts education and suggests that what is often presented as two opposing poles of subject-centred (or

adult-centred) contrasted with child-centred education might be replaced with an alternative. In this alternative – what could be termed adult-with-child - the adult takes responsibility for helping the child learn how to accommodate and adjust their ideas to the realities they encounter. So this is not about children having complete freedom to express their own ideas nor being directed to fulfil an activity chosen by the adult in a prescribed way, but a two-way process. This may, for example, involve helping children work together to build something and learning to adjust and compromise their ideas with one another, or introducing problems for them to think about and resolve.

PRACTICAL TIPS

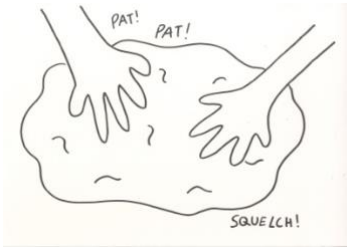
- Provide pieces of thick cane, cut about 30cm long with masking tape wound around the ends (in case the cut cane has rough edges)
- Provide generous quantities: big lumps of clay, a large numbers of sticks.
- Leave the structure and don't tidy it away at the end of the session, to see how it might be continued and extended

MOULDING AND SMEARING

MY DAD'S MOTOR BIKE AND MY DAD'S POWER TOOLS

THE PRACTICE STORY

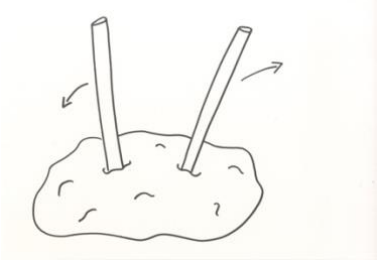
Rich reflected that one dimension of the play with clay was about representing things, such as the child who, every week, wanted to make little clay babies, and another was about just playing with the wet clay, to experience its sensory qualities: smearing, smoothing and patting it.



One girl had been very occupied with taking pieces of clay and rubbing them between both hands to make sausage shapes. She then added each sausage shape to a small, but growing pile. As the small pile of sausage shapes grew, she announced, 'it's my Dad's bike.' The setting staff knew her father and older brothers have motor bikes. Rich said, 'we were fairly certain the sausage making came first and then something triggered the thought that it looks like my Dad's bike. It had some sort of quality of the pipes and the shape of the small pile. Playing with the clay came first, and "what it could be" emerged later'.



One boy's father works with power tools and his mother works for a firm which supplies power tools. Two sticks into a lump of clay became a power tool which the boy operated by pumping the sticks back and forth. As he operated the power tool he made vocal sounds to act out the machine noise.



ADULT ROLE

When children have freedom to choose how an activity progresses, they will create what is highly meaningful for them: my Dad's motor bike, my Dad's power tools. The Take Art team were very alert to accepting the children's ideas and validating them, and ensuring that they did not inadvertently impose their own social and cultural values on what the children do and say.

Victoria writes: 'there is a delicate balance between extending children's ideas and unintentionally influencing their direction . . . and that supporting creativity requires continual awareness of when to participate, when to scaffold and when simply to observe without saying a word'.

THEORY

Cultural Capital

A 'funds of knowledge' approach allows children to align family and community experiences with their educational experiences. There is concern that working class cultural capital is often undervalued in the experiences offered to children in education, community arts and the theatre and museum sectors, where middle-class cultural codes and feminised cultural codes can predominate. Implicit messages of devaluing working class culture and also, in particular, of devaluing 'masculine' stuff' – motorbikes and powertools - may reinforce a sense for young boys that they do not belong in education or in cultural settings.

Garth Stahl describes how white working-class boys in particular may develop what he terms a 'fragile learner' identity[i]. By this he means a sense of inadequacy shaped by a mismatch between school values and working class, masculine identity. As a result boys can reject the values encoded in education. Their identities thus remain underdeveloped and they may also, in the later stages of schooling, become resistant and disaffected. Validating boys' interests and masculine identities therefore becomes important.

Generative Sources

A study of young children playing with percussion instruments led to the concept of 'generative sources'. It is an idea which can be applied more widely. The generative sources are:

- number, shape and patterns
- children's bodily movement, with rhythm and gesture
- children's vocalisations
- words and word play
- drama, narrative and role play
- children's existing knowledge of songs, stories and rhymes
- objects and materials
- memories of everyday experiences
- ideas they take from others – their peers, adults

The generative sources are simultaneously present in children's play. We cannot say that imaginative ideas arise from only one source. All sources are potentially and continuously present, but like a kaleidoscope are continually shifting so that one may dominate at any one moment. Young children's focus is unstable, but there is often a connecting thread and each idea pushes on the next, in a kind of free-flow process. So it may be the quality of the clay that is uppermost in the child's attention and the action of pushing in the sticks, which quickly

shifts to an image drawn from everyday experience (of a power tool), which is vocalised and moved to give it extra impetus and etch out the idea of the power. Acting out the power tool movements creates a mini-drama. To experience the back-forth movement of the power tool controls is a simple rhythmic, pattern. The adult shows interest and attention, encouraging the idea to develop and continue.

4e Cognition

4E cognition is best understood as a set of ideas in understanding cognition that have been grouped under the broad title of 4E cognition, rather than a distinct theory. The 4E stands for the idea that the mind is embodied, embedded, extended and enactive. It suggests that creative thinking is not only inside the mind; the whole body and the outside world of people and things also shape how we think.

EMBODIED – the body, its size, shape, strength and how it moves, its senses, enables children to interact with and experience the environment. The body both enables and limits what children can do. Children mould the clay with their hands and through that sensory, embodied experience come to understand its properties and what they can do with it.

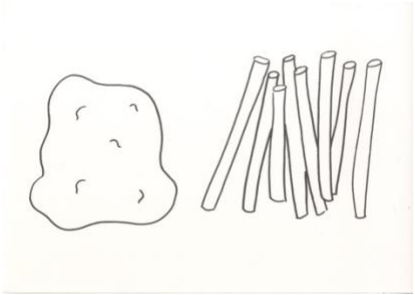
EMBEDDED – the mind is embedded in its surroundings – both physical and social. The growing pile of clay sausages makes the girl think of a motor bike.

EXTENDED – we use things as thinking tools. This is easier to understand with respect to pencil and paper (working out maths problems for example) but can also apply to a child using a stick to prod and shape the clay.

ENACTIVE – perception and thinking evolve as we do things. As the clay and sticks are formed so they evolve and children 'see' ideas in the clay structures and think about them as they transform.

PRACTICAL TIPS

- Use a grey pottery clay and avoid the air-dry clays
- Purchase large, 12.5 kilogram bags so that the children have a quantity to play with
- Avoid any coloured clays that may stain
- Provide non-slip boards for clay moulding made from MDF cut-offs and clipped to the table so that they do not move around



LITTLE PEOPLE: BIG IDEAS

The Take Art team have been working with preschool children in two Somerset early childhood settings as part of the Energiser Project funded by Youth Music. The project places artists to work over an extended period in one setting. The artists visit weekly, for a whole morning, bringing their own resources, and work with the children to promote creative play. They involve the staff in reflective discussions at the end of each session to encourage their understanding of how to provide for and promote creative play. Funding provided by Youth Music, Octagon Music Hub, Somerset Council and Dorset Local Alliance Group.

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YOUTH MUSIC
LOTTERY FUNDED
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