

Louise Bardgett, *early moves & spaces*

My creative journey in a Solihull Infant School

I had the opportunity of working alongside two new and committed Foundation Stage teachers over a two year period as part of the Cre8us enquiry programme. As an “outstanding school” in a relatively affluent area of Solihull, this came with its own challenges and in particular, how to build an understanding and integrate creative approaches into the curriculum and also, dealing with “academic” expectations from parents versus the importance of creative play. I was fortunate to work alongside a visionary head teacher and experienced creative agent, who were prepared to take risks along the way.

Having worked mainly as a movement practitioner in early year’s settings, I was interested in how my creative practice and process-led approach would translate into a more formal school environment. Working across two classes, with 60 children, with limited outdoor space (particularly during the first year as the school was in the middle of a major redevelopment programme) was a challenge. For instance, lots of structure needed to be built in within the day, to ensure both teachers (and teaching assistants) could be involved in the planning, delivery and reflection process.



My brief was to help the FS teachers build a shared understanding of creativity and its value in children’s play, learning and development rather than within “the arts”. As the first project spanned over two half terms, I tried to link ideas to complement the class topic areas, which included ‘Through the Keyhole’ based on houses and homes and ‘Food around the World’. Books featured throughout and were used as stimulus and a way of enriching/bringing to life stories such as ‘Handa’s Surprise’, ‘Hansel and Gretel’, ‘Three Little Pigs’ and ‘Mrs Wobble the Waitress’. Due to space restrictions, the majority of the project happened in and around the wooden pergola outside, which allowed for smaller groups to have a longer, more focused experience. It also encouraged children (and in particular boys) to work on a much larger scale with open-ended materials. For instance, we were able to explore different shapes through drawing, kinaesthetically through their bodies and in 3D using canes and in animating their stories of trails and pathways through recycled materials.

However, this also presented problems for staff to observe/co-deliver and battle against the sounds of playtime and PE lessons sharing the same space. With all this in mind, we decided to structure the remaining time differently, collapse the timetable (with no breaks for literacy and numeracy practice) and work intensively over one day with each class. Using the story of Handa’s Surprise, we all worked incredibly hard to transform each classroom into an African village, keeping the planning very open to allow time and space for the ideas and learning to be led by the children. Having built up a strong relationship with the teachers over a period of time, provided a level of trust, mutual respect and shared sense of responsibility. There can’t be many teachers who get up at the crack of dawn to buy exotic fruit from Birmingham fruit

market on a Saturday morning, in preparation for the transformation of their classroom on Monday!

The success of the first project, led to further funded workshops with the school as part of their environmental week, a demonstration for a group of European teachers and the chance to continue working with the same teachers for a second year. This time, I was invited in at the very beginning of the academic year to help shape the project and give advice on the layout of the two reception classrooms within the new Foundation Stage unit, with adjoining creative space.



Our second year took a different journey, using the book 'The Beautiful Stuff' by CW Topal & L Gandini as our starting point to develop an environment conducive for learning and creativity. Brown paper bags and labels with the accompanying poem were sent out before half term, for children and their families to find their own "beautiful stuff" to create a treasure area in the new space.

*'I look, I search. I hope to see something that appeals to me.
Something unique - or maybe not.
Buttons, milk tops, straws - the lot.
A blue green shape just caught my eye.
I don't think I can pass it by.
Whatever it is, it makes me glad.
And so, I'll put it in my bag.'*

We wanted to involve the children in the design and use of this space, including setting up a Remidi inspired area (a creative recycling centre in Northern Italy), so that children could freely access a wide range of open-ended resources and provide interesting starting points for exploration and investigation. Building on their new found confidence, teachers had already transformed this "space of possibilities" into a hover-craft, glacier, jungle, snowstorm, volcano and a waterfall and the space continues to evolve.

Throughout the projects I learnt much, especially about the value of time (and sometimes lack of it!) and in finding new ways to document projects, which proved useful to evidence learning, share our reflective process with class teachers (particularly if they weren't directly involved at times) and, as a tool to provoke dialogue with children. It also provided high quality "promotional" resources for the school which were shared within a parents evening, governors, rest of the school and with other Solihull head teachers. Film provided a central platform and through a mutual interest with one of the teachers, we created our first I-movie. This is something that I have continued to develop in all of my work in schools and has proved a useful forum for teachers/practitioners to articulate what they did with other colleagues.

Alongside numerous other Creative Partnership projects, I have become more confident in my own creative practice and use a range of visual, multi-sensory and physical approaches as well as multi-media to support my work. The relationship

with the two teachers gave me the permission to grow, to take risks and use a range of artforms to explore how we worked. I am eternally grateful for their support.

Equally it has opened new doors to what I do now and as a result, has given me the opportunity to work more collaboratively with visual artists, in longer term projects mainly in Leicester. This shared vision and approach has led to the setting up of a new artist collective, The VERY idea with fellow artists, Anna Ryder, Matt Shaw and Barbara Jones, all of whom were involved in the initial early year's pilot project 'Second Skin' in 2005. We are now developing new challenges as our work is moving into new territory such as a cross generational project involving a whole village.

Email: louise@theveryidea.co.uk or louise.bardgett@hotmail.co.uk

Website: www.theveryidea.co.uk

Phone number: 07775 900177

Supporting documents - Photos spanning two years of the project.