

Little Acorns

EARLY YEARS CREATIVITY PROGRAMME



*"they have
come here
and been
encouraged
to fly"*

Welcome

This exciting Early Years project was devised in celebration of Liverpool's 800th birthday. The city's schools and communities developed exciting projects and events to celebrate the birthday year and we wanted to include our community's youngest members in these celebrations. Liverpool Culture Company consequently initiated the Little Acorns programme which set out to engage 3 distinct sectors including Liverpool's 124 private and voluntary nurseries, the 321 childminders within their networks and the 9 established children's centres.

We wanted artists and settings to explore with their children what is special about their neighbourhoods, their communities, their families, their city, and to develop creative programmes that celebrated the rich culture that is Liverpool.

The Little Acorns programme worked closely with Children's Services to ensure that it was developed as part of the regional strategic framework for Earlyarts. The programme aims to facilitate the development of sustainable creative partnerships between early arts practitioners and early years settings and providers. It aims to create a legacy that will grow well beyond 2008.

Phil Redmond, Creative Director and Deputy Chairman of Liverpool Culture Company

"It contributes to children's confidence. They're trying things they haven't tried before, different manual, dexterity and fine motor skills".
Teacher, Liverpool College Pre-Prep School



The evaluation of the Little Acorns Programme was commissioned by Liverpool Culture Company, and delivered by Isaacs UK. It aims to celebrate children's creativity, raise the profile of the culture of Liverpool, and inform the increase of good practice in supporting children and adults' creative learning.

Throughout this report the term artist is used to mean a creative practitioner of any artform including, but not limited to, visual arts, crafts, dance, story telling, puppetry, music, movement and drama.



Introduction

In 2007 Liverpool celebrated its 800th birthday. The city's nurseries, schools and communities developed exciting projects and events to celebrate the birthday year. At the same time, Liverpool Children's Services Early Years team identified a gap in provision and conceived this early arts project for the city's youngest citizens. They commissioned Liverpool Culture Company to deliver the Little Acorns programme which set out to engage 3 distinct sectors including Liverpool's 124 private and voluntary nurseries, the 321 childminders within their networks and the 9 established children's centres.

They envisioned a project which would see artists develop inclusive practice hand-in-hand with the early years setting's staff and children, and in some instances also extend to families. It was felt that projects should contribute to the Every Child Matters strategy and Early Years Foundation Stage Areas of Learning and Development; exploring physical and emotional health, offering opportunities for children to enjoy the sessions and achieve new levels of personal and social development, as well as make positive contributions to the programme and influence the creative output. Liverpool Culture Company hoped that the partnerships set up through the project would continue as a legacy after the completion of Little Acorns.

The Little Acorns Early Years Creativity Programme began as a partnership between Liverpool Culture Company, Liverpool Children's Services Early Years Team, the Children First Forum and the Earlyarts Forum. It aimed to design, develop and put in place flexible partnership programmes of creative learning activity for the foundation stages, i.e. children ages 3–5.

Artists and arts organisations were invited to submit project proposals outlining their creative approach and possible ideas for the artistic content of their sessions, in response to themes of the city, communities and family. The early years settings used this as a basis to select their preferred arts partner, after which Liverpool Culture Company commissioned the final four arts organisations to work on the creative realisation of Little Acorns. The partnerships comprised:

Fuse: New Theatre for Young People – drama and puppetry with St Columba's Church Nursery; Our Lady's Bishop Eaton School; Vauxhall Children's Centre; Hunts Cross Kindergarten Day Nursery; Stoneycroft Childminder Network

Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra – music with Fazakerly Childminding Network; Kiddy Factory Nursery; Anfield Childminding Network; Everton Children's Centre

The Aspire Trust – visual arts, singing and movement with Kensington Children's Centre; Hope Valley Community Primary School; Tab Pre-School; Wavertree Childminding Network

Wild About Words – story telling, singing, crafts and den making with University of Liverpool Children's Centre; Christ the King Primary School; Liverpool College Pre-Preparatory School; Garston Childminding Network, East Prescot Road Nursery and Parklands Children and Family Centre.

Executive Summary

The most vital characteristic of the project was development of the children involved, each of whom found new potential in small and large ways. Some found new languages with which to communicate more effectively; others developed new skills and interests; a few found a way to come out of their shell and realise everyday life need not feel so intimidating; others simply found they wanted to join in and share their ideas, where before they had not been able to find the open door. Most found they could achieve more than they realised, by being given a wider space to explore, and the permission to do so. All these successes provided a beginning rather than an end, and have provided a bedrock for continued creative and playful learning in the future, where settings are able to embrace the positive impacts of this project.

Staff and artists developed new skills and ideas, refreshed their professional enthusiasm, identified and overcame stumbling blocks. They found out about the direct ratio of collaborative partnership planning to the success of a project and its impacts whilst discovering new ways to include families in children's development. By rising to the challenge of stepping back and letting children lead, staff became more skilled in tuning into children's ideas and interests and understood more about how that child-led creative play can enhance social, communication and listening skills. They acknowledged that arts activity speaks in so many more languages than just verbal and that genuine child-led play helps children identify their place in small and large communities. Professionally staff had space to question their own practice, learned how to implement new methods in their daily practice, include more creative ideas in their mid to long term planning and found out more about children's potential individually and collaboratively. They were inspired by the discovery of new strengths and characteristics in their children. Aspirations about the potential of arts and creativity as a mechanism for improving children's development have been raised all round.

Staff acknowledged the vitality of the materials artists brought to the projects. They realised that the simpler and more open-ended an object is, the more creative potential it has for a child. Some learned that a feather, an egg, some canes and pegs, a drum or bell, a hat or cardboard box is enough to engage a child's imagination effectively and thoroughly. Some settings specifically identified the need for funding to buy new materials so that they can continue the work initiated by artists, and began the process of this even before the project ended.

Artists have been able to test new practices and processes or refine existing techniques. By working in a range of formal and informal settings they have increased their knowledge of the early years sector, what they can bring to it and what it requires of them – and how to negotiate the spaces between these aspects. They developed a deeper understanding of how to work with very young children, the importance of children's reflective time, continuation and consolidation of their learning. They learned that children's ways of working can change their own artistic practice, and cast new lights on their own creativity.

Staff have the impetus and confidence to engage in more creative learning partnership projects. They can be more explicit in their own objectives for future activity, and have trusted and well respected creative contacts to approach for future exploration. They understand how creative play can contribute to national learning frameworks. Artists can approach their next early years project with confidence and a deeper understanding of early learners' needs, having had the opportunity to observe, respond and reflect on their experiences of this work. They have also come away with new professional early years contacts, with whom to develop further relationships with. The project has provided a springboard for continued collaboration between the artists and settings involved.

Family members have had chance to engage in activities they wouldn't normally encounter, bringing new points for communication with their children, ideas of how to engage with them outside their child care providers and the chance to see the full potential of their children's learning. In some instances, the content of projects has helped bridge the gaps between life at home and life in the settings, and families can continue this, helping their child develop a more integrated outlook.



ASPIRE



EXAMPLE

In the third of seven sessions, Ellie provided a range of materials that followed on from the previous week, including light/shadow play, cardboard boxes and drawing material. The children, aged 4 to 5, came in to the space and were initially very excited by the tent with a variety of light sources inside it. The play then flowed into cardboard boxes, which developed from a television theme, with individual children in their spaces talking to each other through the screens.

EXAMPLE

Alicia created an activity to help the children understand movement, senses and language. Children sat in a circle, all holding the edge of a large lycra sheet. They were encouraged to think about how it might be used, until the children took over and adult intervention was no longer required. Children pulled, stroked, bounced things on, wiggled their toes under, put their heads under, crawled under as though it were a den, moved it over them and back up in the air as though to appear and disappear, moved into the middle underneath and back out again... each change led by a child's suggestion.

Creative approach

The **Aspire Trust Ltd** work with all artforms. Their artists use creativity to develop and improve children's learning, and let children lead the activity. For Little Acorns, by providing a framework of opportunities, ideas and materials, the artists scaffolded children's ideas and acted as facilitators of those ideas. The sequence and content of the session was left open-ended so that it could be truly led by the children. Artists observed the behaviour of the children and responded to changes in idea, interaction and mood spontaneously, encouraging children's development by asking them questions about what they were doing or imagining. They provided space for children's imagination to come to the fore, steadily supporting them through the session, enabling play to become more complex and helping them engage in deeper levels of learning. Artist Ellie used small and large scale activity to engage various senses. She found that working with children at their eye level helped communication and listening, and was a successful technique for encouraging them in their play. Alicia is a performing artist combining voice and movement; working with simple, open ended materials such as fabric, a large scented lemon toy, drums, and the nursery furniture alongside rhymes, games and song.

Working and planning together

Artists worked closely with staff, pro-actively including them in the activities. Artists used naming games and songs where children, staff and artists were all included and introduced to one-another. Staff roles were both supervisory and participatory. By including staff from the start, wary team members became more confident, joining in more easily, leading by example for the children.

Staff and artists made time throughout and after sessions to discuss new ideas for future sessions, addressing areas in need of change or improvement, identifying individual children's unexpected or expected responses, acknowledging moments of achievement and so on.



ASPIRE



Play, learning & development

The sessions at Tab Pre-School were in the children's free-play time which was part of the daily routine at that setting. By the second week, all the children joined in the sessions of their own accord. Whilst some contributed more animatedly, even younger or quieter children stayed within the activity space, waiting for the right moment to join in, or observing the other children.

Each workshop consolidated learning with a reminder of some activity from previous sessions, and a short, simple recap before the artists left. The children's commitment to the activities surprised staff and brought unexpected benefits to the children's learning:

"It's such a long time for children to concentrate, it's amazing. Initially we were a bit concerned about the length of the session but in the end we haven't changed the timing. We were very surprised the children focused that long."

"Caiden tends to do mostly his own thing and that's fine, but in this session he wanted to be in the group all the time. It was lovely that he wanted to be part of what was going on."

"The singing of stories really captivates them and helps keep their attention, it stimulates their imagination."

At Hope Valley Community Primary School, again children demonstrated sustained periods of concentration, persistence, challenge and imagination. Staff felt that this kind of creative play made it possible for the children to focus on having their ideas and voices heard, often for the first time. One child was seen to concentrate for a sustained period for the first time whilst making a 'bumpy slide'. As well as her increased focus, her extended use of language in this play was exciting for staff who had never heard her engage like this before. Staff now feel she is more likely to become engaged in other activities and that the project 'opened a door' for this child.

Staff recognised that artists were able to bring added values to creative projects by seeing things from a different perspective, often similar to how children see the world. Through this artists can spot magic moments of imagination and creativity within the children. Being involved in this project offered the time and opportunities to draw these out in a way that might have otherwise been unavailable.

Professional development

Staff at the Tab Pre-School identified a skills gap in dance and drama and wanted to use the project to help address this. Working with an artist was new to them,

"We didn't know entirely what the artist would bring, but we hoped it would refresh our enthusiasm and ideas. It's really given us new confidence, especially in the younger members of staff – new ideas, different things to do. We've revisited and reinforced the activities in the week between the artist's visits."

Across the wider project, Aspire's artists noted that nurseries wanted to explore activity linked to literacy, through story telling or song, and considered how they might support this, what story telling actually means and looks like, or how to offer alternative approaches to story telling and literacy. Artists learned about staffing roles and structures in early years settings, sometimes working with an individually assigned 'creative member of staff' whilst in others, working across entire teams. They acknowledged the different types of groups artists could be asked to work with, from a very small group of the same age or developmental stage, to a full nursery of 70 children, and the effect this had on the scale, content and impact of their activities. Artists felt genuinely interested and inspired by the children's ideas and what they had to say. This not only fed the direction of the activities and project, but impacted on the artist's own approach to their practice, causing them to revisit the ideas and materials they work with.

FUSE THEATRE

Creative approach

Fuse: New Theatre for Young People's ethos is to develop a flexible creative programme in partnership with the host setting, including planning discussions before each workshop, covering expectations, aims and potential issues. They used theatre, story telling, music, movement, puppetry, and visual arts to create two 'new children' (actors) coming to school from a far away place. The two characters, Rowan and Summer, built a relationship with the children, the workers in the nursery and the parents of the children. Nursery children met the characters' Dad and Granny, who introduced them to den-building and what life was like in a simpler, more natural environment. The piece culminated in a big party for one of the characters, involving the setting's children and their parents to celebrate the life of the nursery and the community. The actors never came out of character and it was vital to the project's development that they were fully integrated with the other children. Family, home, and community and Liverpool's place in the world were strong themes of the work.

EXAMPLE

In the third of six sessions, staff and artists had developed their integrated approach: when the characters were not listening and talking over the teacher, feeling sad, shy and lonely, not understanding what to do, and shouting and pushing instead of being patient, the actors relied on staff to treat them as they would any other children. The session focused on Summer's birthday party, which was an opportunity for exploring different approaches to group play, celebration and inclusion. Children were asked how they had made their own party cakes, why you had cakes at parties, what parties were all about. Various children had also been invited into Summer and Rowan's extended family, pretending to be their brothers and sisters. Later on, a simple puppet show revisited the story, entrancing the children.

EXAMPLE

By the last of the six sessions, staff and artists had already developed relationships with the actors and been part of a developing narrative involving the two characters and their wizard mum. The children were actively engaged in supporting the characters to retrieve magical objects that would help them with a spell. Later, children and characters pulled objects from a hunted-for trunk and travelled through a magic ring to retrieve hidden objects. Children commented, remembered events from previous sessions and thought about future events, "Dragons eat spiders! I don't like spiders"..."I liked singing that song to Rowan" ... "I made a den, me, me, me!"..."We could have a cake for the birthday."

Working and planning together

At Bishop Eaton, the school had utilised role play previously to explore personal, social and emotional issues in school, so accepting characters into their real world was an approach children were familiar with. Working together as a team enabled staff and artists to tailor activities to individual children. Evaluation at the end of each day helped integrate children's ideas and plan for the following session. Staff needed to find ways of supporting the actors to discreetly integrate the children's ideas organically throughout the following day; and actors had to think on their feet, responding to different situations. Some days, staff stayed late to make new items for the characters based on children's ideas that day. Since the actors were in character throughout, skilful support from the staff was vital in order to fully involve the children in the activity, and ensure the characters were treated in the same way as the other children by staff.

"The children all believed we were real, which was amazing and really made us realise the capacity of their imaginations."
Actor.

Some schools offered a more structured approach to teaching and learning which was different from the open-ended play approach common to nurseries, though staff were open and flexible with the creative and learning journeys involved. Fuse actors explained:

"Staff work within a tightly structured environment. I think we brought something different to what they've had before and were all very happy with what came out of it."

FUSE THEATRE

Play, learning & development

The project linked to the Early Years Foundation Stage aiming to develop the children's speaking and listening skills, creative imagination, and ability to share, make friends and co-operate. Learning was consolidated through integrated techniques such as a puppet show, recapping on stories and situations.

Through interacting directly with children, actors created enormous potential for children's personal, social and emotional development, such as encouraging children to assess the appropriateness (or otherwise) of their own behaviour. Actors used questioning techniques to motivate children in leading or controlling the direction of activities, and to help them make sense of what was happening. The skill and success of these techniques revolved around the trust and friendship children had developed with the characters as equals.

"The fact that we didn't introduce the characters when they walked in one day forced the children to take charge and start asking questions about who they were and why they were here. Change is something rare to experience in some of their lives, it's really helped them become independent thinkers because they know that not all change is bad." Teacher, Bishop Eaton School

One teacher, Anne, felt the project addressed several Areas of Learning and Development, including communication, language, literacy and mathematical development, creative development, and knowledge and understanding of the world. In addition, children's confidence, social, communication and creative skills have grown beyond staff and actor's expectations during the six weeks.

Anne adds:

"It has been such a magical journey... some of the children tend to stay on the edge of activities, but this is one of the rare times where the children have all worked together as one whole group – it's been lovely to watch"

At St Columba's Nursery unexpected levels of engagement took place. Staff member Lisa noted a higher level of engagement in one girl throughout each session than she had ever demonstrated before.

Professional development

Staff's creativity and confidence increased, as did their experience of open-ended, play based learning:

"We have learned to step back and let the children take the lead so that their ideas come out in their own time. Staff have been involved in the role play and seen the positive results, so they don't mind being daft anymore!" Teacher, Bishop Eaton School

The actors agreed:

"Teachers said that the project raised their expectations of what the children could do, and are more convinced of the value of child-led activity."

St Columba's Nursery aimed to encourage speech, communication and language development, and challenge the staff's expectations of children. Manager Julie felt the project succeeded in both, and that staff felt less inhibited and more able to follow children's interests and ideas. The staff reflected on ways to let children lead freely, whilst handling their excitable behaviour, and felt that working with puppets, as the actors had done, was a tool they would use again in the future.

Lisa commented that her experience of boat-making with the children using every day materials such as pegs and ribbon, had given her confidence to use simple materials to create imaginative spaces. She found the project helpful in giving her ideas to develop play such as den-making or puppetry, and had increased her confidence in trying out new ways to inspire children's imaginations.

Fuse felt the day-long sessions, truly led by the children, had enabled the development of their improvisation skills. Artists learned about working in different ways for different projects; sometimes planning collaboratively from the start; sometimes for settings who didn't know what to expect from visiting artists, it was useful to have to a more solid starting idea which adapted as the project unfolded, according to the responses and ideas of staff and children. Collectively Fuse's artists found their expectations of the capabilities of three and four year olds had been significantly raised.

ROYAL LIVERPOOL PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

EXAMPLE

A typical session takes the form of a circle and includes a hello song welcoming each child by name to the group; nursery rhymes with accompanying actions for each child (with their parents where relevant) and / or the Song Bag, in which children choose an object from the bag and the group sings a song related to it; instrument work exploring the sound and feel of the instruments appropriate to age of child, and using child-led improvisation; chill-out time – an opportunity for parent and child to relax together and listen to live music; and the goodbye song, singing goodbye to every child by name

EXAMPLE

Musicians initiated a game of stop and start for 0–3 year olds and their parents. A boy walked between the violinist and cellist as they slowly moved round the room. The room was peaceful with a trance-like atmosphere. As the boy's concentration grew, focussing increasingly on the music around him, and 'joining in' on the guitar he was carrying, the pace of the walk grew slower and slower, led by his immersion in the moment. Elsewhere a handful of children explored a table full of instruments, handling, stroking, prodding and poking at them, picking them up, smelling them. The children used their senses to learn about the instruments as objects, each child quietly engrossed in their own activity. In the corner, a baby sat very still, staring at the musicians as they played, taking in the sounds and movement. In a later session, Joshua sat calmly with a guitar. He looked down at it, at how he was holding it, placing his hands on the frets and strumming his fingers. A group gathered and he showed other children how to do it too.

Creative approach

Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra (RLPO) provides children with opportunities to experience professional classical musicians and music. Through their early years work RLPO has developed 'Song for Home', a model used as the basis for each project, with delivery changing as each project unfolds according to the children involved. It links to all Areas of Learning and Development in the Early Years Foundation Stage learning framework. RLPO took the family aspect of the project's themes, working with parents and children together and bringing families' personal songs to the projects.

Working and planning together

RLPO encountered different models of planning across their projects. In some instances they worked with nursery staff during a training day so each knew what was expected of the other. In others, partnership began on the first session in the nursery setting. At the end of a session, musicians reflected on the successes of the workshops, adaptations that could be made for the following workshop, or identified particular children whose characteristics and confidence might be used to join or lead activity next time.

At Everton Children's Centre, RLPO had an existing relationship and were able to build on previous work in their approach to Little Acorns. The project explored parent / child interaction from 0 to 5 years, and preventative action to support children with communication difficulties. Staff hoped the collaboration would deepen children's social, listening and language engagement through musicality and play. They wanted to experience the two professional talents together – specialist creative expertise, with early years educators, "we learn from each other".

"Though we found a format that works, for us it's more about reflection than planning. We have to be spontaneously responsive because it's always different children, different parents, different ages and developmental stages, the children's mood on the day..."

Musician

ROYAL LIVERPOOL PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

Parents were invited to join sessions, bringing valuable focused interactive time between parents and their children. Musicians noticed, "It's such a big thing for parents, we do see them slowly change and evolve over time, but it's a big thing to ask some parents to let go and let themselves be led by their child"

Musicians felt their role was to trigger creativity, to show that musical ability doesn't depend on formal training. It was important to involve their own instrument because "as a musician that's what we can bring that staff can't do even with training, it's the value we can bring to a project as musicians. But we can also show that music can be done in the home or at nursery without us."

Play, learning & development

During post-session reflection time at Everton, staff member Andrea noted that one boy, "normally has so much negative energy, and he was so calm and focused" and explained that another boy who had not yet developed verbal language demonstrated his learning by moving his arm as if to play the violin, whenever he heard violin music. She discussed the baby who was 'stilling', sitting very still, watching intently and assimilating information as the violinist played. Musician Georgina observed:

"I think we tuned into the children really well today. I thought today's session was truly led by the children. It's the first time we've seen the children interacting together with the activities too".

At Speke Kiddy Factory, RLPO's project co-ordinator noted:

"Nathaniel had a dummy for the entire session and didn't join in any of the singing. By the 3rd session he removed his dummy and was joining in with the actions and the last or most significant word in each phrase. By the 5th he was happy to come and chat and sing to me during the session, keeping eye contact throughout each song".

Alex at Anfield Childminding Network adds:

"The thing I enjoyed most about the project is the effect it had on the children – they enjoyed the experience of a different type of music and being allowed to join in with the musicians. One child in particular has behavioural problems and the effect of the music on his behaviour has been phenomenal."





Professional development

The project consolidated staff's own practice in remembering it's not about the adult's own agenda, but letting the child lead independently, noting the power of 'OWLing' – observing, waiting and listening. Staff could integrate the artist's new ideas into their own delivery and planning, which lead to an increased confidence in their using music with the children. One of Anfield Childminding Network's representatives explained, "I now know how to approach a group session with musical instrument and have tried it myself! The childminders have asked for the project to continue and a few have offered to take a lead with the sessions".

Becky, another nursery worker adds, "I will definitely carry on the idea of a song bag with the children after the sessions have finished. They enjoy the sense of anticipation when the song bag is being passed round and start doing the actions even before the object is out of the bag!"

The musicians and early years staff undertook early years planning training, each interpreting it in their own way. For some, this meant adapting planning from one week to the next, whilst others learned to respond to children spontaneously. One musician reflected, "What I find most tricky is to know when to move on, how much to lead or how much to follow. The challenge is to provide the minimum structure, while letting the children be free". She felt inspired by the fact that, "Every week I feel like a complete beginner, starting from square one and having to write everything down again".

WILD ABOUT WORDS

EXAMPLE

Children worked in small groups to fashion dens from chairs, canes, pegs and fabric. There were lots of opportunities to explore shapes, materials, quantity, texture, problem solving and construction. Each child found a role, from gathering the pegs, to holding the canes, working out what to do next with a staff member or each other. Some children used the materials set out for covering the dens as capes, sarongs, and ball gowns. One den became a castle, in which princesses were held hostage by dragons. The children took the story into their own hands, widening the 'cast' and spinning out the drama for the full remainder of the session and on into break time, incorporating the other groups of children throughout.

EXAMPLE

Aristotelis generally found it hard to concentrate for long periods. In the instruments, however he discovered that not only could he play the xylophone loudly and fast, still making lovely sounds, he could also do it with one hand and pick up a shaker with the other, playing them simultaneously. The sharp crisp sound of both together made him extremely happy, expressing all the pent up frustration he had felt in earlier activities, added to which the fact that he drew lots of positive attention and was in complete control of his actions. He played this for a long period of time, then moved on to the ukulele, which he also found emanated an incredibly loud and tuneful sound without getting told off! It was literally music to his ears and a beautiful, tuneful and positive noise, unlike the shouting he sometimes engaged in.

Creative approach

Wild About Words took children on a journey across the sea, looking for presents to celebrate Liverpool's 800th birthday. The birthday present could be a story all about their amazing journey or a treasure chest created by the children, filled with wishes and dreams for their future. The journey started from the moment each child wakes up in their own homes to provide opportunities for everyone to talk about their own special places, friends, families in Liverpool. Along the way children encountered stormy seas and blazing suns, created fantastic dens, sang songs, dressed up, acted out, took part in Indian dances/food tasting, made their own musical instruments and celebrated their experiences in a birthday party atmosphere at the end of the project. The programme included a range of open ended tasks and opportunities in which children were able to drive the creative process, and utilised story-telling, song, dance, drama, craft making, food and den-making. Each child was invited to bring their own teddy into the project as a means of role play, to aid interaction, and provide a safe but personal space for them to engage with each other, different cultures, emotions, opinions and new situations.

Working and planning together

The artists usually started their projects with a preliminary session to help set the scene, explore project aims and build confidence to allow sessions to be child led as much as possible. Though this wasn't always possible here due to the time restrictions of the project, both artist and staff found their roles together early on. Artists brought new creative ideas and activities, with structure and focus, whilst staff assisted in practical and support tasks with the children, such as helping them make things. More planning time early on could develop this further still, increasing staff's confidence in immersing themselves in activities and outlining the distinctions between creative and supervisory roles.

Wild About Words initiated a documentation journal in each setting, in which anyone associated with the project could input thoughts, quotes, photographs, feedback and ideas. This worked well as a flexible system which fitted around other commitments and priorities, and was adaptable to all staff's individual preferences about recording and reflecting the project.

In some instances time was short, so artists and staff worked all the more concertedly to build up relationships quickly and activities had to be concentrated into a shorter timeframe. Staff felt the fast pace succeeded in engaging children whose concentration levels were short, but also felt spending a full day on one element would really help children engage more deeply.

The project helped the nursery bring all the children across the age range together for the first time. Dividing the large group into smaller groups was successful in keeping children focused and immersed, whilst keeping them all together in the main hall meant they could still work, dipping in and out of one another's little worlds.



WILD ABOUT WORDS

Play, learning & development

Using teddies as partners for the children's adventures was a successful technique for engaging the children with the themes of the story, and communication with one another. It helped them identify with the journey's own central characters, teddies from other countries. The bears helped break down confidence and communication barriers for each child on their path through the project.

Children benefited from seeing documentation such as maps and photographs from previous sessions pinned up around the walls. This helped them celebrate and take pride in earlier achievements, provided a reference point for their own physical, social and emotional development, and consolidated learning. It also provided vital continuity for the project during times when the artists were not in school.

At Liverpool Pre-Prep School, a few simple construction and decoration processes enabled many children to take the activity out of the adults' hands into their own joint fantasy worlds, developing complex characters, narratives and interaction between several small groups. Children naturally managed their own group dynamics with emerging leaders, peacemakers, organisers, visionaries, rationalists, builders, listeners and helpers.

The imaginary world created a positive impact on drawing out communication and confidence in quieter children. Several of those who were quieter, had attention or behavioural difficulties, or for whom English was not their first language, were observed listening, engaging, focussing and interacting in ways the staff hadn't seen previously.

"Children who normally find it difficult to concentrate have been more in control and concentrated for longer. This has given them a chance to feel knowledgeable and in control of that knowledge. The day after the artist has been in, they can tell you where they've seen or done something similar, because it means something to them now."

Staff member, Christ the King Playgroup

"Even M, a normally disengaged little girl, joined in because she was given a choice, not told to do something she didn't want to. This was a really important step forward for her".

Staff member, Christ the King Playgroup

Professional development

Staff wanted confidence in ideas they could translate outdoors, such as the den-making and boat building. This was their first arts partnership project and they felt the positive impacts of the creative opportunities in helping them take on board new ideas. Across the settings staff noted that simple props and materials can liberate, rather than restrict children's imaginations:

"It makes you realise just how easy it is to do these things with children. Just by putting on a farmer's hat they become a farmer, it doesn't need all the costumes we spend time making for them! We should get a box of materials now so that the children can make up their own stories and use their own props at any time, rather than having to ask."

The time children spent developing their own roles and events within projects enabled staff to take time to step-back and see what the children could be capable of:

"It's given us the chance to see what's really going on in the children's heads – ideas and discussions that don't normally come out in the daily routine".

Teacher, Liverpool College Prep

Through this project, lead artist Hilary was able to develop ideas about using teddies to safely support children's engagement in story telling and play, and the learning this can develop. She learned about the different roles of staff in nurseries and reaffirmed her belief in the importance of working with staff to ensure they can be as immersed and hands-on as children. Hilary's project planning developed, dealing with complex logistics and differing group numbers, ability levels and development stages, and varied group dynamics – the kinds of considerations which are inevitable when working with busy formal settings. Hilary importantly noted, "We were able to learn as always from the children themselves".

Findings

Project theme

Little Acorns set out to help children understand more about their families and communities, and celebrate their city, an objective that was very much achieved with much pride and love for Liverpool being demonstrated. This theme enabled broad creative interpretation, ensuring artists were not restricted in their approach, which was crucial for the project's success. It enabled them, and the early years professionals to focus on the children's development first and foremost. However the theme also provided a useful shared starting point for all the partners, and brought cohesion to the many partnerships and activities taking place throughout the project.

Each partnership's interpretation varied. For some the diversity of Liverpool's population and its relationships with the rest of the world became a direct theme for artistic delivery. In others the theme was used to strengthen family relationships; whilst some saw the project as an opportunity for children to learn more about themselves, their abilities, likes and dislikes, personal and social skills through creative play.

Partnerships and project planning

All the projects saw artists and early years professionals approach the work as partnerships, expecting each to bring their own experiences and to learn from one another. Whilst artists brought creativity, alternative perspectives, new ideas and a fresh approach; settings and staff brought knowledge of pedagogy and child development, child care structures, experience of appropriate learning environments, and personal knowledge of each child involved.

Feedback techniques were incorporated throughout the project, be they discussion, diaries or photographs. This gave all parties a chance to revisit their aspirations and keep sight of their progress and wider aims, as well as magic moments and particular breakthroughs with the children.

Artists and staff found that child-led activity means being flexible, spontaneous, creative and well prepared, and as such work can progress organically to some degree, depending on the mix of ingredients within each session.

Partnerships in which the settings had been able to outline specific objectives, such as developing confidence with language and literacy, or working on skills gaps outlined by nursery teams, were particularly successful as this gave staff and artists a collaborative starting point for the development of the project, as well as a benchmark for reflection and alteration as projects progressed. Some projects explicitly linked to the Early Years Foundation Stage framework, and whilst all partnerships contributed richly to this, few specifically set out with the connection as a direct objective. Staff have now discovered that creative interventions of this kind can help them deliver their core requirements, and more could be made of this in future planning.

Most settings had not worked on arts partnerships before and those that were able to do so, found that preliminary planning sessions helped them pre-empt some of the challenges that might arise. Joint planning time before projects began helped to identify each party's expectations or hopes for themselves and from each other in terms of their role with the children, creative approach, learning strategies, logistical requirements, commitment levels and so on. It enabled them to consider what their own aims and objectives were, discuss any practical considerations, identify individual children's needs, and build familiarity and trust before involving the children.

In projects where reflection / evaluation time was scheduled in throughout, one question repeatedly arose for which collaborative planning was crucial to address: how can artists and staff find the balance between giving children freedom, whilst ensuring sessions don't lose focus and spiral out of control? Partners found that anticipating fewer activities which the children could lead at their own pace and become more immersed in was more effective than a sequence of events, which might feel rushed and miss opportunities for deep and lasting engagement.

The issue of exit strategies has also been a factor in some settings' planning. Partners have needed to carefully consider how, having built up trusting relations with very small children, artists say goodbye without creating fear of loss or sadness, in order to end the project positively. The continuation of the creative approach projects developed alongside the sharing of children's work through wall displays, books and so on is a strong step towards the safe transition out of this initial project stage.

Children's learning and development

Creative Development

Different approaches and resources: The range of creative development children were able to experience and demonstrate was vast. They worked across all art forms, finding strengths in different ways amongst them. They tested new creative ideas and developed preferences; discovered the value of creative expression where the English language was unavailable to them; explored colours, sizes, shapes, textures, materials; sounds; movement; role play; costume; themselves and their spaces.

Creativity and imagination: Children developed their creativity and ability to harness their imaginations. Artists provided the frameworks and tools to help children develop ideas, along with the freedom to let this become an explorative journey for each child. As staff and artists stepped back to observe and listen more to children's play, they found more opportunities to gently move children on into deeper contact with their creativity by asking questions, finding appropriate artistic materials or spaces for them, or simply by letting play continue without interruption or assumption.

Senses: All five senses were engaged throughout Little Acorns. Sight, sound and touch were more obviously developed through building, movement, song, music, art and so on. However smell and taste were also incorporated. Several projects involved food at parties, or as part of an Indian day. Some art activities incorporated outdoor materials like grass, mud and birds eggs, bringing a new angle to the usual nursery environment. One project involved movement, throwing a large aromatic toy lemon over fabric.

Physical Development

Motor skills: The projects helped develop children's fine and gross motor skills by involving them physically to co-ordinate a piece of work using different art forms. Dance and movement gave children greater awareness of space, their physical presence in it, and control over their movement individually and around others. Large scale artworks such as sculpture and den making also supported balance, co-ordination, reach, movement in and around small spaces. Fine motor skills were developed through crafts making, construction, music and painting.

Movement and space: All projects, regardless of artform, saw children utilising small and large spaces and developing their spatial awareness. In some instances this happened by sitting around a small table with others, choosing musical instruments; in others building dens or exploring tunnels, moving through, in and around larger areas; one project saw children moving in and out from under a tent-like piece of lycra fabric. Many partnerships included dance, movement and group game playing. Throughout these children not only learned about their body's relationship with small, large, enclosed and open spaces, but also how to co-ordinate with, and respect the needs of, other children and adults in those same spaces.

Knowledge and Understanding of the World

Communities: All projects involved notions of communities. In some this meant working in small groups to focus on a particular task, story or making activity. In others, connections were more explicit, talking to children about their families, friends, homes and city. Liverpool was explored in its relationships with the rest of the world, and children learned about other countries, cultures and traditions.

Families: Several projects linked to family life, inviting parents to join sessions, or working with parents to continue activity outside of school. This helped children continue the learning they had begun and stimulated instances where children were engaging in different languages. It helped children identify their different places of familiarity and acknowledge the similarities and differences they hold.

Designing and making: Many projects helped children in their construction and making skills, building, choosing materials, working together to complete tasks, finding out what worked – and what didn't and changing their ideas as a result. Making activities introduced children to new materials, large and small. Anything from an egg to a box, a chair to a cane. Children were encouraged to test the properties of these by building them into dens, TV sets or trees. They found that some materials responded better to their expectations than others, that some were stronger while others more pliable, that some could withstand weight and activity, while others might snap or be crushed.



Problem Solving, Reasoning and Numeracy

Communication: Communication skills developed noticeably over relatively short periods of time. Children whose first language was not English, some of whom had displayed signs of feeling excluded, found ways to play with their classmates or bridge gaps between home and nursery / school life. The freedom and independence they had been given, the multicultural nature of the work, and the expressive qualities arts can offer through many different languages, as well as verbal, all contributed to this. Other children whose verbal language had not yet started developing found the artistic involvement triggered other forms of communication for them, by encouraging their listening, vocal, mark-making and physical skills.

Communication, Language and Literacy

Belonging: Children who previously struggled to join group activities found that the artistic opportunities enabled them to relax and forget their fears or difficulties by becoming engrossed in imaginary worlds and enthralling situations. A significant number of children who usually occupied themselves alone chose to become part of the group as sessions developed and their confidence grew.

Learning and thinking: Projects which planned fewer activities offered more time and space for children to feel their own way through activities. By doing so children were able to create personalised experiences appropriate to their own learning styles, needs, development, interests, preferences and aptitude. Space for joint reflection and review of their experiences enabled children not only to develop sustained and shared thinking skills, but also to question their previous ideas. This helped children to build a more critical analysis of activities and to develop their ideas in confidence. Children were able to harness their new found confidence and learning to make independent choices, explorations and conclusions, ultimately to become independent thinkers.

Personal, Social and Emotional Development

Collaboration: As the weeks progressed, children began to understand and anticipate the artist's sessions, and through a deepening involvement in the activities it became clear that they were extending their own personal journey to involve more collaborative play. They tested ideas out with one another; found that more could be achieved when they helped one another; that their input was entertaining and inspiring for others; and that activity could last longer and become more meaningful when more people were involved. They also began to take on roles such as leader, planner, thinker, peacekeeper, gatherer / collector, maker, joker, and took turns in swapping the roles around.

Focus: Across all projects staff commented on the unusually high levels of focus and concentration children demonstrated. In some instances older and more able children were enthused by a faster moving pace incorporating a series of activities and the general sense of something new and different taking place, though this was sometimes at the expense of younger children who struggled to keep up. In other situations, the space, time and equipment to completely immerse themselves in the ideas and tasks they'd created encouraged children to keep delving deeper and deeper into their creative journeys.

Professional development

Staff commented on the many new ideas they gained from working with artists, such as using new materials, props and activities, and delivering artistic techniques. They learnt new ways to work with language and literacy, how to work in large scale using simple materials, and that a single hat can set a free a child's imagination, where a full costume, elaborately made, can result in offering only a restricted set of possibilities.

By engaging with the challenges of truly child-led activity, and following artists' examples, staff learned to let go of their inhibitions and find their vocal, physical and visual expressions as well as unlocking doors into their own imaginations. In so doing they came much closer to children's own experiences and found new levels on which to build learning and development. They enjoyed themselves, and found that they wanted to develop these skills more in the future, through continued collaboration with these and other artists.

In watching another type of professional work with children, and collaboratively finding a more open, flexible practice, staff learned about the wider potential of their children's development. They raised their expectations around what children could achieve given the opportunity and space. At the same time in the majority of cases, both staff and artists became more skilled in stepping back, letting go, observing, listening and supporting, rather than leading.

Staff learned about the potential of working with creative practitioners, and what such a partnership project involves. Both settings and artists brought different things and it was the combination of these that provided the ideal platform for letting children develop imaginative learning journeys whilst still offering them support and focus.

Some artists found entirely new skills in developing a more flexible, spontaneous and open-ended form of arts based play. Others deepened their knowledge and experience of working in this way. In some instances, such as artists working with drama or visual art, this worked harmoniously with certain areas of their practice as improvisation and instant expression was already a part of their approach. For others whose training or practice had been more formal, it presented new challenges and developed their working style and creativity in new ways.

Even artists who had significant early years experience found that they had underestimated the potential of what the children might achieve. Their aspirations for what they could inspire in children in the future are now higher. Artists now understand a wider range of benefits that the arts can offer very young children in terms of their understanding, communication, awareness, confidence and creativity.

The variety of settings artists worked with have improved their familiarity with early years planning and organisation, be it staffing, physical spaces and resources, or learning frameworks. They know that school and pre-school settings approach things differently; that staff involve themselves in projects in a range of ways and that aims for activity might include anything from children's development, to working with new building or outdoor spaces, or to assist in skills gaps amongst staff.

Practically, artists learned to provide as wide a range of materials as possible, but knowing that simple ideas encourage children's imagination; that revisiting an idea with children again and again helps them reach a deeper level of learning; that working with children at their eye level helps communication and trust; and that food used as part of creative play is a wonderful way to help concepts become real for children.

Whilst artists appreciated that time spent with the children was the most valuable use of their availability, they also recognised that the project could have been developed yet further if all artists had time to meet and share their experiences collectively at the end of the project.

Creative learning approach

The project challenged staff and artists to develop true child-led activity. Some projects succeeded more than others. It emerged that artists need to take the role of facilitators and navigators. They were most effective in facilitating child-led activity when they provided the materials and starting points to fire up children's imaginations, but then stepped back. This required a particular type of creative practice not familiar to all artists, even those with extensive community or education experience for whom a more structured, thematic or curriculum based approach is usually their starting point. Artists found the key to this was not in attempting to create a picture, dance sequence, composition, or to teach a child to draw, paint, construct, carry out a particular step or understand a musical phrase, but instead revolved around unleashing their creativity as a process. This required a flexible and spontaneous style, an ability to observe and respond immediately to children's creative moments, and is all about the process, rather than the product. Some of the artists developed this style skilfully and understood that their role was to provide the tools in terms of skills, materials and opportunities, rather than anticipate any fixed outcome.

Similarly this was a new approach for the majority of the early years staff involved. Whilst some found this challenging to begin with, they soon discovered that it provided them with a chance to listen and watch their children from different perspectives, seeing new potential in them and becoming inspired to build on this new learning.

Partners agreed that making assumptions about how the sessions would unfold, or about which children would do what, was unproductive. Whilst some children demonstrated characteristics staff already knew about, this was an opportunity for them to discover new aspects of themselves and their abilities and interests. Identifying particular children for particular tasks may have helped them develop known strengths, but at the expense of other unknown qualities, and of other children who may simply have needed to find their own way in to reach the same point.

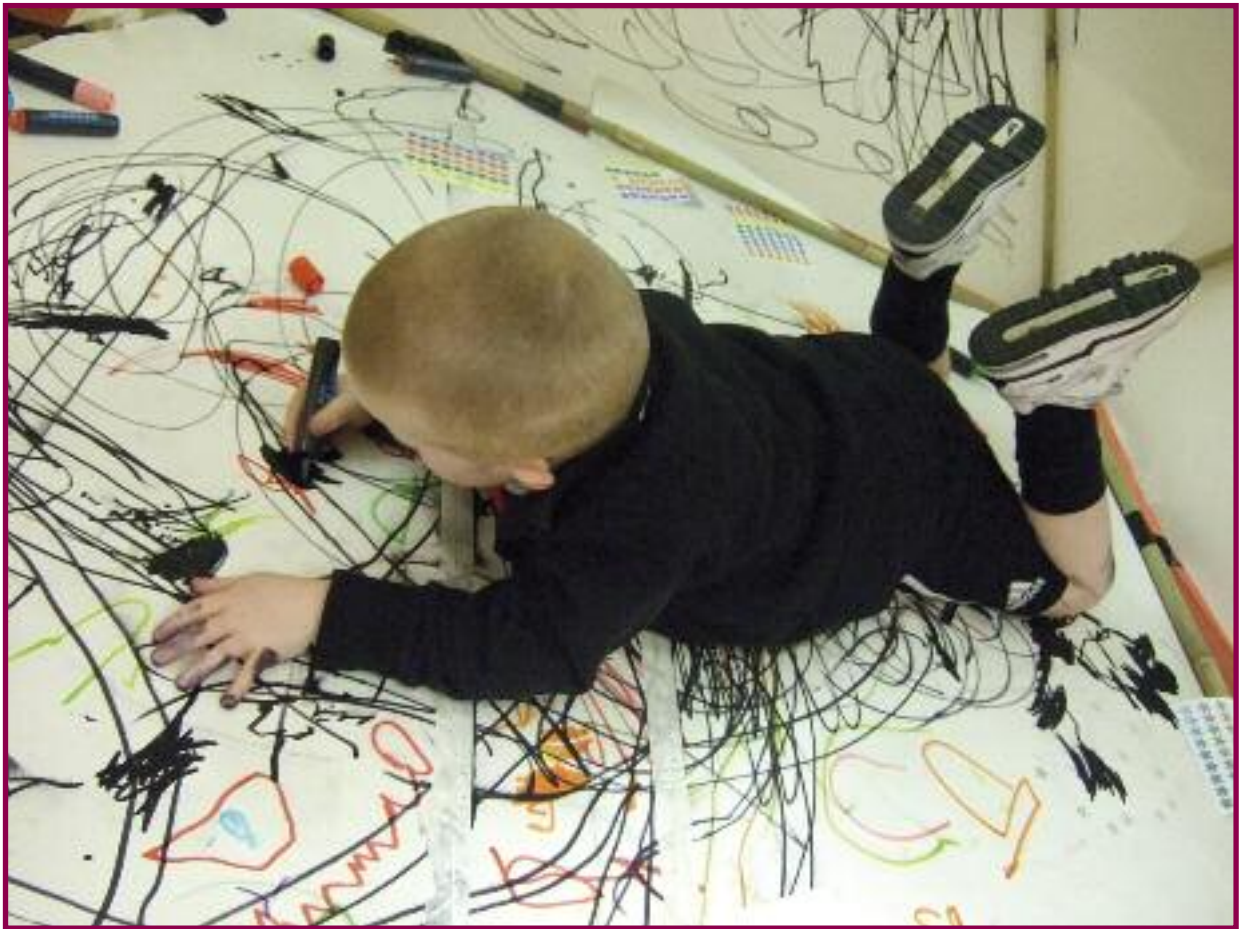
Staff agreed that creative approaches still supported their learning frameworks. Projects that incorporated story telling, narrative, characters, song and languages of various kinds, helped them support literacy development. All projects met Early Years Foundation Stage Areas of Learning and Development in a wide number of ways, some of which the settings would have been unlikely to achieve on their own. Some partnerships also successfully incorporated teaching and learning techniques such as consolidating children's learning by starting each session with a review about what they remembered so far, and ending by asking children about their favourite thing that day, or something new they had found out. To embed this learning further, particularly in between sessions, some projects mounted documentation on the walls for children to refer to such as photographs, pictures, songs and work the children had created.

This style of work took a good deal of planning, in terms of providing the space, time and materials for children to fully explore each opportunity. Time particularly had sometimes been underestimated. Partners agreed that day-long sessions were more effective than hour or half-day sessions; and that staying in one space meant the flow of children's play could continue uninterrupted. Trial and error showed that doing more of less worked better for children fully taking charge of their own learning; rather than slotting a sequence of several activities into a session which then ultimately felt a little rushed and risked children being cut off in their prime. A handful of projects also worked carefully to include time for children's reflection, not only at the start and end of their session, but throughout the workshops. This required the flexibility to include enough time to accommodate this, and a certain level of skill in posing open-ended questions which helped children think in more detail, whilst avoiding the control of their thought paths.



Conclusion

Creative practice has an incredible propensity to make positive impacts on the lives of children, their families and their early learning and childcare providers. It can make little or big differences to the ways in which children see themselves, the world around them, their place in it, and how they communicate this to others. It can provide all sorts of wonderful opportunities to help children and adults alike explore imaginary and real worlds in ways that are sometimes not available to us whilst we try to keep up with daily routines and requirements. Creative approaches to early learning and development also open the doors for adults to see the incredible potential of their children, and to change our perspective enormously on what we think is possible to be achieved, and therefore what sort of support needs to be put in place so that those achievements can be made. We have witnessed, monitored, documented and reflected upon several instances during the Little Acorns project where this has come true, alongside other instances where partners have been challenged. It has not always been plain sailing but above all, children and adults together have shared many experiences through this project, and learnt something new about themselves, each other and the world around them, that has made a difference to who they will be in the future. Little Acorns has opened several different doors for our new explorers. We hope that through these shared approaches, understandings, and learning, the children and families of Liverpool will be able to continue to creatively express and celebrate their city for many years to come.



Arts Partners:

Fuse: New Theatre for Young People – www.fusetheatre.co.uk

Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra – www.liverpoolphil.com

The Aspire Trust – www.aspireuniverse.co.uk

Wild About Words – www.wildaboutwords.co.uk



Little Acorns was evaluated by Sally Fort, Joanne Albin-Clark and Ruth Churchill Dower of Isaacs UK.

Isaacs UK is a creative learning company which focuses on supporting young children's learning and development through creative practice. More details at www.isaacsuk.co.uk

Earlyarts is the professional development network for the arts, cultural and early years sectors. More details at www.earlyarts.co.uk