

Being Explorers: Year 1 Research Project at Orchard Lodge



Overview

Being Explorers was a creativity and biodiversity project, carried out by Year 1 staff and students from St Saviours Infants School, in terms 3, 4 and 5 of the 2013/14 academic year. The project was devised and facilitated by the school in partnership with 5x5x5=creativity Director of Research Penny Hay, Artist in Residence Jennie Norman, and Artist-Mentor James Aldridge.

The project was funded with the support of the Comino Foundation:

'The Foundation looks for better ways of developing young people's capabilities, their capacity and desire to make things happen – their zest and appetite to learn, to create, to change things for the better, for themselves and others'

Comino Foundation website: www.cominofoundation.org.uk

Project Rationale

The rationale for the project was described as follows in a joint document produced with 5x5x5=creativity:

- a. This will strengthen the school's 'Learning to Learn' program.

- b. It will provide a clear context for raising the profile of science teaching, with an additional aim to research and increase biodiversity on the school site.
- c. This will be a high profile 'academic' piece of research that will support our work to clarify and share our school's position/brand/vision and values'.
- d. The project will link to our ongoing 'Bringing the Outdoors Inside' Comenius project.

Setting the Scene

A decision was made early on that a professional actor would come and play the role of Graeme The Explorer to launch the project, and that the upstairs two rooms of Orchard Lodge (a vacant house in the grounds of St Marks' School), would be set up as Graeme's study and a drawing lab respectively. The downstairs open plan space was painted white, with the aim of it evolving as artwork was applied directly onto the walls, floor and ceiling, creating an installation and atelier whose design was informed by the evolving interests of the children.

When Graeme visited Orchard Lodge he gave the children a tour of 'his' house and garden and asked them to look after it for him whilst he was away travelling.

'He ...really bought the idea of Graeme the explorer and feel that looking after the house gave him a sense of ownership and responsibility, motivating him further.'

Helen, Mother of Lewis, Year 1 student

Roles and Responsibilities

Artist in Residence Jennie Norman, who brought skills and experience in both theatre design and fine-art printmaker, described her role as follows:

'My brief was to set up a studio/atelier in the building of Orchard Lodge which was outside of the school environment. In this studio we would be looking and responding to Biodiversity in the natural world. We would be looking at this from a scientific and an artistic viewpoint. The key elements underpinning this was creativity, discovery and exploration.'

Year 1 teachers Claire Whitehouse (also school Science Coordinator), Lisa Lowman and Grace Webster's experiences of the project, are represented here by Claire, who describes her own aims and responsibilities as being:

'To inspire children's creativity, to allow children to pursue their own ideas and lines of enquiry, to link science and art skills, to explore the school's learning to learn skills outside of the classroom and in a different context, to work with

an artist, to take learning outside of the classroom (and) to raise the profile of science in the school.'

Artist-Mentor James Aldridge, who has worked with St Saviours' Infants for several years through 5x5x5=creativity, acted to support the project through review meetings with the staff and Jennie, and by visiting projects sessions to document and advise.

Sessions and Participants

Two classes of children totalling 46 individual students took part in the project, attending twice-weekly sessions at Orchard Lodge throughout terms 3 and 4 and the beginning of term 5.

Additional linked lessons took place back at school, including a number of cross-curricular literacy lessons, one art session and approximately four science lessons.

An additional session for a small group of students, who it was felt would most benefit from the experience, was held at the Forest of the Imagination event at the Sion Hill campus of Bath Spa University in term 6. The children took part in activities and performances provided by a range of artists and performers, before returning to Orchard Lodge and making artwork inspired by their experiences, with James.

Session Content

Sessions were devised by Jennie through dialogue with the staff team, in response to the observed interests and needs of the children, and to make the most of the local environment.

'In the grounds of Orchard Lodge there were many aspects to explore. The pond was full of tadpoles, the trees were full of blossom, there were trees to make dens....Responding to the spring pink blossom six children of Year 1 and myself lay under the cherry trees. We listened and looked at the sounds and the colours....Using brushes and hands, branches, bricks and pebbles were painted. Delight by the children to have permission to use their hands and to paint 3D branch. The end result also looked beautiful under the trees.'

Jennie Norman, Artist in Residence

'They loved the freedom and the space, the chance to do what they wanted to do without any limits, they loved being "scientists" and being outside. They were amazed at the changes in the environment with the seasons...'

Claire Whitehouse, Year 1 Teacher

Learning and Outcomes

The projected outcomes of the project were described as follows in the original project plan:

1. High quality staff development in 'education as research', ways to support children's progress through 'Learning to Learn', and ways to create strong links between 'basic skills' and the wider curriculum.
2. High achievement for all children, through the teaching of basic skills (including learning skills) embedded in a rich and relevant research based curriculum.
3. Ensuring that children's learning is embedded in their local environment, making clear links to issues of environmental responsibility where appropriate.
4. Securing a high profile for Science, celebrating its position as a natural context for research and learning skills.

On completion of the project, Claire described what she believed to have been the benefits for the students involved and for her own practice as a teacher:

'I loved seeing the children working together in a different environment and seeing their enthusiasm for the project. It was great to be able to go off timetable and allow the children the time and space to be creative...

Some children really benefitted from getting messy and exploring the tactile side of paint etc e.g. when they painted the walls and mixed colours using their hands.

I understand the school's learning to learn skills more fully (now) and am able to include them in my everyday practice more, the language is more embedded.'

Jennie was also keen to share her own learning:

'At the same time as this project I was working at Sussex University and getting work ready for an exhibition. I was surprised to find that exactly the same questions were in place around the creativity in all three areas. This was about the ability to take a risk, to have the confidence to play and having the permission to do this.'

It seems clear from these comments that the benefits of such a project are as much about the professional development of the adults involved, as the learning of the children. Working in such a child-led, creative way enables the adult to learn from the child, and to embed this learning within their future practice, whilst a creative, playful, multi-sensory approach enables that all children are given opportunities to engage in their learning in ways they find enjoyable and stimulating.

'I believe that the outdoor element of the project excited him and that he felt he was 'discovering' rather than being taught.'

Anna, Mother of Miles, Year 1 student

'Our research findings clearly demonstrate the value of fostering creative enquiry by empowering children and young people to take the lead. 5x5x5 participants enjoy an extraordinary, exhilarating journey through which they explore the world around them and discover the joys of proactive learning.'

5x5x5=creativity website: www.5x5x5creativity.org.uk

The level of engagement and emotional investment by the children in their learning at Orchard Lodge, is made clear through feedback provided by both the children and their parents, as is the impact of having a whole house to look after, curated by a professional artist/designer and introduced by a 'real' explorer.

Feedback from parents was gathered at a sharing event at Orchard Lodge at the end of the project. A selection of this can be seen below, please see the Appendices for further feedback from Claire, Jennie and Parents/Exhibition Visitors.

'Vince talks a lot about 'the project' and the Orchard Lodge. We heard much more of the activities he is being involved (in) here than any other things at school'

Father of Vince, Year 1 student

'The work and learning that has been achieved is fantastic! What creativity and fun has been had! '

Mother of Amy, Year 1 student

'Its amazing, what a wonderful exhibition. They have been working so hard. I am very proud.'

Carrie, Mother of Lily, Year 1 student

'A wonderful space, magical colours what a fantastic learning space. Would love to see this rolled out to other year groups.'

Parent of Year 1 student

Challenges and Changes

As a research project, some of the key learning must centre around what is found to be challenging about working in a new way, and what changes would need to be made for such ways of working to continue.

All adults felt that in future smaller groups would make it easier to manage behaviour and to document, follow and respond to individual children's interests. Working with a smaller group of children and having continuity of adult support enables individual learning journeys to be documented and tracked across the length of a project, and for children's needs to be more fully met. Of course with smaller groups comes the challenge of maintaining appropriate staffing levels and enabling access of all children to the learning opportunity.

The number of children involved and the ambitious nature of the project also provided some practical difficulties in terms of the time and energy needed to set up and tidy away:

'The amount of physical work in preparing it was quite challenging' Jennie

In answer to the question 'What if anything would you change and why?' Claire replied:

'Number of children and adult helpers, more initial discussions to ensure all adults are fully aware of the purpose of the project and how to facilitate children's ideas.'

This suggests that professional development for all staff involved, including Teaching Assistants and Artist in Residence, would be valuable in enabling the whole 'team' to begin the project with a shared understanding of what creative, child-initiated practice looks like, and so 'hit the ground running' in terms of their support of the children's creative engagement.

Similarly Jennie was unclear about *'The role of artist in residence and the relationship with the teachers and TA. It was not clearly defined or clearly set out...'* Although James's role included time spent with Jennie and the teachers supporting them to explore how their different roles fitted together, there could perhaps be a little more of this at the start of the project, and should funding allow, more regular contact with a mentor throughout.

Within 5x5x5=creativity research projects there is always an element of 'not-knowing', As the teachers, artists and children explore their creative relationships with each other and their environment, choices are made as to how best to structure sessions, who does what and when, for the benefit of the learning of all. In this sense it can seem to an artist or teacher, like Jennie, that they are *'...feeling my way through the whole project'* or like Claire that they feel challenged by *'...the number of children and number of adult helpers... knowing who was "in charge" and leading the sessions... creativity v structure and organisation, child led v adult led activities.'*

Additional time made for professional development, and mentoring may help to alleviate some of the anxieties associated with this, and support the team to learn from previous research projects, where the issues of group size, the balance of child-led and adult led elements, and the role of documentation has already been explored.

Appendices

1 Jennie's Feedback

4. What was your understanding of the purpose of this project?

My brief was to set up a studio/atelier in the building of Orchard Lodge which was outside of the school environment. In this studio we would be looking and responding to Biodiversity in the natural world. We would be looking at this from a scientific and an artistic viewpoint. The key elements underpinning this was creativity, discovery and exploration. Year 1 children were encouraged to make their own explorations while discovering and working with provocations that were set up by the artist in residence.

5. What did you hope the children would gain?

I hoped the children would explore and enjoy their creativity. I hoped that taking a risk with their enquiry and having permission to explore in all way would give them confidence.

6. What did I hope to gain from the project?

As this was the first time I had worked with 5x5x5=creativity I was feeling my way through the whole project. I hoped that the children would gain a sense of adventure/ interest/ wonder at the natural world that they were exposed to and have the confidence to enjoy and play with their creative responses.

7. How did the children benefit?

In the grounds of Orchard Lodge there were many aspects to explore. The pond was full of tadpoles, the trees were full of blossom, there were trees to make dens. An example is below and please find attached photos.

Responding to the spring pink blossom six children of Year 1 and myself lay under the cherry trees. We listened and looked at the sounds and the colours. Pink was mixed by the children using the red and white pigments. Using brushes and hands branches, bricks and pebbles were painted. Delight by the children to have permission to use their hands and to paint 3D branch. The end result also looked beautiful under the trees.

8. Feedback from parents.

The feed back from the parents was very positive. Claire has written feedback from the parents in a sketch pad.

9. Practice and benefits.

At the same time as this project I was working at Sussex University and getting work ready for an exhibition. I was surprised to find that exactly the same question were in place around the creativity in all three areas. This was about the ability to take a risk, to have the confidence to play and having the permission to do this.

10. What did you find most challenging about the project?

The amount of physical work in preparing it was quite challenging. The role of artist in residence and the relationship with the teachers and TA. It was not clearly defined or clearly set out. Time allowed this to improve and work well.

11. What if anything you would change if you were to do it again? Why?

I got into a muddle about my hours so would like more clarity and definition there.

12. What kind of project next?

I realised I had a unique opportunity setting up a studio at Orchard Lodge which was outside of the school. Also to be able to use my skills from working in theatre. I enjoyed the responsibility that I was given and appreciative that the studio/atelier space was developing all the time.

2 Claire's Feedback

1. How many individual children were involved in total?

46

2. How many sessions took place at Orchard Lodge in total?

Twice weekly throughout terms 3,4 and beginning of term 5

3. How many directly related sessions did you lead, outside of Orchard Lodge?

Lots of cross curricular literacy sessions and approx. 4 science sessions, 1 art session

4. What was your own understanding of the purpose of this project?

To inspire children's creativity, to allow children to pursue their own ideas and lines of enquiry, to link science and art skills, to explore the school's learning to learn skills outside of the classroom and in a different context, to work with an artist, to take learning outside of the classroom, to raise the profile of science in the school.

5. What did you hope that the children would gain?

A greater awareness and understanding of what it means to be a scientist, a greater understanding of learning to learn skills and science investigative skills, the chance to follow their own lines of enquiry and develop their creativity, the chance to work with a real life artist.

6. What did you hope to gain from this project?

A deeper understanding of how individual children learn, a better understanding of their interests, a chance to work with the children in a different environment, a chance to try out new ideas and a clearer understanding of how the 5x5x5 project works.

7. Looking back, how do you feel the children benefitted from the project? Please give examples of the benefits for individual children. What did they do? Why/how was this important for them? (Please attach an image where possible)

They loved the freedom and the space, the chance to do what they wanted to do without any limits, they loved being "scientists" and being outside. They were amazed at the changes in the environment with the seasons and they really took on board the idea of "Graeme the explorer" they felt they had an important job to do looking after his house. Some children really benefitted from getting messy and exploring the tactile side of paint etc e.g. when they painted the walls and mixed colours using their hands.

8. Please share any feedback from parents/family members

I have the comments book from the open day but it's at school, I think Penny had a copy of the comments. But all very positive and they felt it was an amazing opportunity for their children and they didn't stop talking about it at home.

9. Looking back, (how) do you feel you and your practice have benefitted from involvement in this project?

I loved seeing the children working together in a different environment and seeing their enthusiasm for the project. It was great to be able to go off timetable and allow the children the time and space to be creative. I understand the school's learning to learn skills more fully and am able to include them in my everyday practice more, the language is more embedded.

10. What did you find most challenging about the project?

The number of children and number of adult helpers, the clearing up afterwards, knowing who was "in charge" and leading the sessions, the challenge of creativity v structure and organisation, child led v adult led activities.

11. What if anything would you change, were you to do it again? Why?

Number of children and adult helpers, more initial discussions to ensure all adults are fully aware of the purpose of the project and how to facilitate children's ideas.

12. What kind of project would you be interested in being involved in next year?

Something similar but maybe using school grounds?

3 Exhibition Visitor Feedback

Thank you for providing such a wonderful opportunity and experience for all the children. The work and learning that has been achieved is fantastic! What creativity and fun has been had! Please continue – its brilliant. Jane, Amy's Mum

Such an amazing space and project. I didn't want to leave! We really enjoyed the opportunity of seeing inside as we walk past everyday. So creative and inspiring. It would be so lovely for the school to continue using it. Well done Year 1! Nicola and Daisy

I was here: Vince

What a fantastic project! Lewis has talked enthusiastically about Orchard Lodge throughout the project. I believe that the outdoor element of the project excited him and that he felt he was 'discovering' rather than being taught. He also really bought into the idea of Graham the explorer and felt that looking after the house gave him a sense of ownership and responsibility, motivating him further. Thank you for sharing it with us, and for allowing Lewis to learn 'without walls'. Helen, Lewis's Mum

Fantastic to get to visit. Libby has been so excited by the project and we have been hearing so much about what happens here. Hannah

Bel was over the moon to show us Orchard Lodge and I can see why, it's fabulous

I think its nice. Otis (5 yrs)

Impossibly good! Denzel (4 yrs)

I love the pond sculptures. Maxwell (age 6)

The house was fascinating! Lovely seeing so many happy adventurous people. Wayne

What a wonderful exhibition! Miles has been so excited about showing me the work they have been doing. Really enjoyed seeing everything and am very impressed! Miles's Mum

Konnie really loved everything and I really enjoyed seeing her work. Lee

What a beautiful space. Milo, Lily and I loved looking at all the delicate pieces, the sketchbooks, the artwork. So much talent! Ursula

An amazing resources and a wonderful project that has obviously inspired the children. Really hope it continues for future year groups. Well done all involved – I'm sure it was hard work coordinating it all. C J Nicholls

A sense of freedom. Steve (Jacob's Dad)

Beautiful bugs! Wonderful colours and mural paintings. Brian Goodsell (sp?)

Fantastic space for the children to use, hope it continues. Harvey and Sandra

Great to see Orchard Lodge, we've heard A LOT about it. What a brilliant project, I love the insects and the colours. Anna's Mum Kate

Coming here was good. Anna Collis

We are painting pichers of dougs (sic)