

CURIOUSER AND CURIOUSER – WHAT MAKES AN EFFECTIVE CULTURAL EXPERIENCE FOR CHILDREN IN EYFS GROUPS?

Making a Mark is a partnership of eight museums across the Tees Valley. Led by Kirkleatham Museum, Redcar, the partnership comprises: the Cleveland Ironstone Mining Museum in Skinningrove, Captain Cook Birthplace Museum, the Dorman Museum and MIMA (Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art) in Middlesbrough, Preston Park Museum and Grounds, Stockton, Head of Steam in Darlington and Hartlepool Museum and Art Gallery. The partnership is funded by the Department for Education (DfE) through Arts Council England’s Museums and Schools national programme. Redcar and Cleveland Council’s Children’s Services have an Advisory Teacher who supports an Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) network and was central in helping us plan and shape our exploratory project.

SUMMARY

The idea of exploring new approaches to EYFS provision across the partnership came from an increase in Reception and Nursery classes booking visits. All partners were already offering EYFS visits, but most sessions had been created by re-developing Key Stage 1 workshops.

We decided to base our planning on the Characteristics of Effective Learning (CoEL) – part of the EYFS framework that all Early Years teachers use to guide the kind of learning experiences they offer. This would both inform our planning and give us a shared language with teachers.

Image © Hynes Photography



Early Years toolkit



Image © Middlesborough Institute of Modern Art

We recruited a co-explorer teacher per museum – someone happy to spend time planning a new kind of visit with us and then bringing children to test it out. Jo Graham, our partnership’s Learning Advisor, has expertise in Early Years so she was able to strength test our plans against the CoEL and to help maximise engagement with our collections.

We built in a reflective session after the pilots to share our insights. Museum Learning Officers, the Learning Advisor and EYFS Advisory Teacher met to capture and discuss the insights from our separate pilots. We broke our overall exploratory question down into subsections: What have we learned with regard to planning and delivery of cultural experiences; how has using the CoEL impacted on our practice and how can we use these findings to deepen our understanding and expand our partnership working with EYFS professionals?

AIMS AND GOALS

For our organisation

This was an exploratory project that aimed to develop and reflect upon practice rather than achieve specific outcomes. We therefore posed ourselves the question: **What kinds of museum visits could be effective cultural learning experiences for EYFS groups of different ages?**

We wanted to see what might emerge if we designed an EYFS visit from scratch – drawing on wise practice guidance from the EYFS framework. As well as the CoEL, we discussed research on how young children learn, the way child development stages overlap with different age groups, and the centrality of language and talk to young children’s learning.

For our audiences

Our aims were that:

- EYFS teachers would become enthused about the potential of local heritage to provide effective EYFS experiences in line with wise practice
- children under five would find our museums welcoming places where they could have playful, age appropriate learning experiences
- any family adults taking part would consider our museums to be places where they and their children could have interesting and enjoyable shared experiences.

OUTCOMES

For our organisation

We set out to deepen our understanding and that certainly happened. We gained insights into effective ways to structure EYFS visits including the importance of offering experiences that allow children to lead their own learning. Each venue's pilot reflected the uniqueness of the building and collection and also the working practices and everyday realities of the EYFS setting. Whilst the length of visits, subject focus, number of children and number of adults all differed, some constants were:

- the value of play: from pretending to clean galleries to matching games with real objects
- the value of exploring: from investigating gallery space using sticky tape and string to making 'maps' of their visit
- the value of real experiences: from welcoming visitors at the front desk to close encounters with authentic objects
- the value of stories and imagining: from making up their own stories as they followed dino footprints to enacting 'The Train Ride'.

Image © Hynes Photography



We also:

- increased our own knowledge of EYFS approaches to teaching and learning
- gained confidence in planning activities with both process and content learning outcomes in mind
- gained insight into how different children are developmentally at different ages within the EYFS, for example two of our partners offered the same themed visit to both a nursery and Reception group. In each case they needed to swap out some of the activities, even though they were playful and open-ended, because the developmental differences between year groups are more marked than with older children.



Image © Hynes Photography

For our audiences

EYFS teachers are more convinced of the relevance and value of museum visits. Word of mouth about the pilots spread and we had an amazing 70 EYFS teachers attend a network meeting to hear about the project. We organised a follow up meeting, based at one of our museums, which focused on how playing and exploring in the museum could contribute to children's cultural capital. This was full to capacity with 45 EYFS teachers in attendance and we were so over-subscribed that we had to restrict schools to only sending one representative.

Typical feedback from teachers who took part in the session was:

'The museum session contributes to the development of cultural capital in a meaningful way, linking to practical experiences and the Characteristics of Effective Learning. This supports all of us to link with families.'

Outcomes for the children varied according to the focus of their visit, but some common outcomes were that children:

- felt comfortable and confident in our spaces
- were fascinated by our stories, buildings and objects
- felt able to explore and try out their own ideas.

'It was such a rich day. The children were so keen to explore and develop ideas. Every moment was a new learning opportunity.'

Nursery Teacher

LESSONS LEARNT

We learned so much:

- getting the right level of challenge for the children enables them to achieve 'flow' learning – this is a concept developed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi where the level of challenge and intrigue in an experience is perfectly matched to the learner and so the person becomes totally absorbed, such that nothing else is important. Csikszentmihalyi maintains that people are at their happiest when they achieve this state.
In young children this links directly to agency
- providing real world context before children interact with objects deepens their understanding, eg playing with clay before seeing ceramics
- giving children 'permission to be...' is empowering. Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art (MIMA) issued their four year-old critical friends with stickers that said 'For adventure and fun' which validated the children's (sometimes messy and noisy) exploration of the space.

We also learned ways in which EYFS visits can differ from other Key Stages:

- in some visits we had a family adult per child and activities needed to be suited to those learning units
- carousels of activities are fine but it's better if the session leader floats freely between them
- activities need to be play or exploring opportunities – open-ended, with lots of opportunities for experimenting and decision making
- if a nursery turns up with different aged children from what was booked/ planned, then plans need to change!

BUDGET

We paid for a day's supply cover per teacher co-creator – £1,400 in total. Each partner received £10 per pupil funding from Making a Mark, to cover lost income and enable partners to provide the pilot visits for free.

FUNDING

We had money as part of our Museums and Schools funding from DfE via Arts Council England.

TOP TIP

So that children can lead their own learning, we need to plan more '**moment by moment**' – creating things for children to explore rather than activities for children to do.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Some of our pilot visits have made it into our regular programme and are already being booked by other settings and schools. Details are here:

<https://teesvalleymuseums.org/schools/workshops/>

Early Years toolkit

The Characteristics of Effective Learning are a non-statutory part of the EYFS framework within a document called Development Matters.

www.early-education.org.uk/development-matters-early-years-foundation-stage-eyfs-download

Initially we tried to plan as you would for a school group but we discovered our approach often needed to be closer to 'in the moment' planning. This meant having a wider set of possible outcomes for the children and allowing them to follow interests to achieve any of them (or indeed other outcomes).

<https://eyfs.info/articles.html/teaching-and-learning/planning-next-steps-in-the-moment-r217>

You can watch a short film about this work here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9pO4t7ay_mo

This case study was written by Jo Graham,
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