

A NURSERY IN RESIDENCE

The Fitzwilliam Museum is the art and antiquities museum of the University of Cambridge. Cambridge University Botanic Garden (CUBG) holds a collection of over 8,000 plant species for teaching and research. Since its foundation, the Garden has also provided a beautiful place for everybody to enjoy and benefit from. Ace Nursery School is in central Cambridge caring for children from 2 1/2 years onwards. It was founded in 1966, and is run as a parent co-operative. The children invited to participate in the study were between their 3rd and 4th birthdays, and were attending the nursery either four or five days per week.

SUMMARY

In October 2017, nine children from Ace Nursery School spent five consecutive mornings in residence at The Fitzwilliam Museum and Cambridge University Botanic Garden. The residency formed the basis of a multi-disciplinary, practitioner-led research project by a team of museum, garden and nursery practitioners. Groups from this nursery had visited the museum previously for one off sessions, but we hoped that the residency would give us the opportunity to take time to observe and reflect on the encounters between young children, spaces and objects in the collections and to develop a better understanding of what the museum and garden can offer to young learners.

Working in close collaboration was a key aspect of our research methodology and pedagogical practice. We are now planning to share and develop good practice within each of our settings and beyond.

A typical day during the residency began in the education spaces of the museum or garden, with time to greet each other and an introduction using objects or children's artworks from the previous day to connect back to previous activities, and to set the scene for the day ahead. We then took some time to explore the galleries or an area of the garden, with activities structured by the adults as a starter: perhaps a story, some mark making activities or small world play. The children then built on these suggestions in their own ways, for instance one child spent extended periods of time engaged in very detailed and complex mark making in her project journal, while others explored the spaces with their whole bodies, circuiting areas of the garden or stretching themselves out along benches, and others chatted with adults using puppets and toys to initiate conversations. The high adult to child ratio of 7:9 meant that individual children were able to make their own decisions about exactly what to do, what to look at and where to be.

Following a snack break, the education spaces at the museum and garden were used for children to express themselves in a wide range of ways, such as using clay and natural materials, mark making at the table and on the floor, outdoor play, printmaking and adding photographs and drawings to their project journal.

AIMS

For our organisation

- To enable closer collaboration between educators at the Fitzwilliam Museum, CUBG and the nursery, focusing in particular on the intersection between creative approaches in the arts and sciences
- To document the residency as part of an action research project in order that the outcomes might be shared with key stakeholders such as parents, nursery staff, museum and early years professionals, funding bodies and researchers
- To develop our own practice based on professional reflection and systematic analysis within a formal research project

For our audience

- To give children an opportunity for rich and extended engagement with the Fitzwilliam Museum and Cambridge University Botanic Garden
- To help children to participate more fully in our cultural spaces as capable and confident young citizens

OUTCOMES

For our organisation

- Although the focus of the project was on a very small group of children, the impact on the professional development of the practitioners and on museum and garden learning programmes promises a much wider impact:

[I felt motivated] 'to really take the time with children and really listen to them. When they're a group of course you try to do it, but I tried even more when I came back. I thought, these children had this gift that we gave them: all this attention. So I tried to do it even more when I came back. Because that's what children need – to be listened to. And that's what you did. And we did, that week.' Nursery Practitioner in post-project interview.

- This project enabled us to better understand and articulate the potential of collaborative practitioner-led research in informal learning contexts. This represents a significant area for future development.



For our audience

- As the children developed their confidence over the course of the residency, they also revealed a growing sense of ownership and belonging within the museum and garden.

'I think some of them grew in confidence particularly. If you look at [child's name]...the difference when she started to engage in an environment different from here...she was leading them down the stairs, was leading them through the hedge in the Botanic Garden. That's something we haven't seen from her here at nursery.'

Nursery Practitioner in post project interview.

'Whose garden is this then?'

'Ours. Children's'

Museum Educator and Alanna

- Transitional objects such as learning journals, sketchbooks and small world toys enabled the participants to make links and build connections between the different settings.
- The project highlighted the benefits of working together to create knowledge about places, spaces, objects, and collections.

'It was such a privilege and I really treasured those moments where we were so many adults and could really be with one child for a long period of time.'

Nursery Practitioner in post-project interview.

LESSONS LEARNT

The project required ongoing discussion and reflection, culminating in the writing of a final report - all members of the project team were actively involved in commenting on and contributing to the final report. This process took over six months to complete. This was due to a variety of different factors, not least that our position as practitioner-researchers meant that we had other projects and commitments running simultaneously.

Our methodological framework required a collaborative approach at all stages of the project, as a key aim of the work was to democratise the ways in which we create knowledge. It is important to consider the extended time necessary to facilitate this process when planning collaborative research.

TOP TIP

Extended residencies are a big commitment but they are invaluable for building in-depth dialogic relationships between educators working in different contexts, and between children, adults and spaces. This is important not just because it leads to better understanding of each other, which can in turn improve practice, but because it is a way of working towards more equal and democratic relationships in which children's and adults' contributions, however they are offered, are valued equally.



BUDGET

This project required investment in staff time as very high adult to child ratios were needed to enable the collection of good observational data. In addition, extra staff time was needed for professional discussions, reflection and writing up the project – in total, the project required around 300 hours of staff time.

FUNDING

The project was funded by the University of Cambridge Museums.

FURTHER INFORMATION

To find out more, visit the project page: fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/university-bridge-museums-nursery-residence

This case study was written by Nicola Wallis, Museum Educator at the Fitzwilliam Museum.

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