

Year Two Report: Build and Test

Penryn Creativity Collaborative Action Research Report

Research Question:

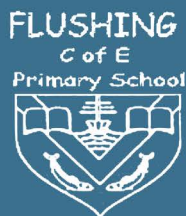
How do stories influence play for children in their early years?

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Creativity Collaboratives Network Partner:

KEAP (Kernow Education Arts Partnership)



KEAP



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This Action Research project is part of the Penryn Creativity Collaboratives.

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CONTEXT

Creativity Collaboratives is a national pilot programme of eight clusters of schools across England who are working together to test innovative practices in teaching for creativity, sharing learning to facilitate system-wide change. The programme, launched in October 2021, is funded by Arts Council England with generous support from the Freelands Foundation. Creativity Collaboratives: Penryn Partnership is the South-West pilot for the programme and over the course of three years is focused on exploring one central question: Does teaching creativity across the curriculum lead to young people who are better prepared for their future in a changing workforce?

The Penryn Creativity Collaborative is led by Penryn College with eight local primary schools and research partner, the School of Education at the University of Exeter. This report presents findings from one of thirteen action research projects which took place during Year 2 of the Penryn Creativity Collaboratives programme. Each action research project was led by a teacher with students from their own school, included a link with a partner from a local industry, and the lead teacher was supported by researchers from the University of Exeter through a programme of training and mentoring.

Full findings from Year 2 can be found in the research report. To cite this report please use:

Crickmay, U. Childs, S. Chappell, K. (2023). *Preparing for a Creative Future: Year Two Report Build and Test* <https://penryn-college.cornwall.sch.uk/creativity-collaboratives>

THE PROJECT

This action research project involved 10 nursery and Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) pupils aged between 3 and 5 in Flushing Church of England Primary School in Flushing, Cornwall, England. It was led by Helen French, Early Years Lead, Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo) and nursery and EYFS class teacher over a 6-month time period.

Flushing is a small coastal school where children are taught in small classes spanning two year groups. It is a welcoming, safe and caring environment within the heart of the community, where we teach a creative curriculum through half termly topics that inspire children and enhance learning. We are close in proximity to Falmouth University and the Falmouth campus of Exeter University which has a direct impact on the families which we work with, our children are often creative with a sense of worldliness. We have forest and beach school sessions and explore the locality to enrich the curriculum. We have strong links within the Penryn Partnership and work closely with other schools within it, utilising resources, skills, training, moderation and facilities.

The early years classroom where this project took place is offsite in a wooden open-fronted building that opens onto a large green space with a wooden play park. The project lasted for 4 months (excluding school holidays) and consisted of regular story sessions by the teacher followed by opportunities for play linked to the story and with freedom to choose. Moments in the days after the story sessions that related to our research question were also recorded. The children's play took many forms: artistic, musical, verbal, imaginative and physical, outdoors and inside; all were considered as creative responses to the story stimulus.

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The project explored the role of stories and how they influenced the children's play within the early years. We incorporated key texts into our topics during our research and used these as our impetus for inspiring our children to respond creatively. This Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum in England has a play-based curriculum with one of the prime areas of learning being communication and literacy. This research enabled us to focus solely on this vital area, isolating stories and the impact on children's play whether this be indoors or outdoors, collaborative or independent.

My special interest was in the language running throughout their play, enabling them to recreate and/or learn from the texts that they had been exposed to. This opened doors for creativity with the children's play and ensured that they had the tools needed to express themselves fully. The project also touched on the early learning curriculum goal of being imaginative and expressive, an area that we value and actively encourage as best everyday practice and we highlighted this for this action research project.

We worked with cultural partner Kernow Education Arts Partnership who supported the project with a visit to see what the project explored. The conversation provided enabled feedback and links to a local author who then came in to read her stories to the children. This was used as a springboard for some of the research in this project as the children responded beyond our expectations by taking these stories with them into their play. We saw this as high impact, immersive practice that enriched the curriculum and deepened the children's understanding of the role of stories within their world.

DEFINITIONS OF KEY TERMS

Creative Skills

The research drew upon the Penryn Partnership Creative Skills Framework developed during Year 1 of the Penryn Creativity Collaboratives programme (Crickmay, Childs & Chappell, 2023). The framework defined creative skills in a five-part model and this action research focused on four sections of this model as follows:

Dialogue and collaboration

Drawing in notions of dialogue, questioning, communicating and collaborating, in both verbal and embodied ways.

Honing and developing an idea

This combines the skills needed to develop creative ideas, incorporating aspects of self-reflection together with development of techniques and understanding of the rules and the persistence needed to progress creative ideas and actions.

Empowered action

Foregrounding pupils' own agency in creative action, as a skill this includes the ability to take risks and question accepted ideas, the capacity to be immersed, and the ability to act on creative ideas

Being imaginative and playful

This is the ability to utilise imagination, to improvise playfully, and to generate and try out possibilities: as with possibility thinking, it is the ability to go beyond an understanding of 'what is' to consider instead 'what might be'.

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Creative Pedagogies

The research drew on the Penryn Partnership Creative Pedagogies Framework developed during Year 1 of the Penryn Creativity Collaboratives programme (Crickmay, Childs & Chappell, 2023). This framework used two prior reviews of creative pedagogies: Cremin & Chappell's (2019) systematic literature review of 30 years of empirical research on this topic, which identified a series of seven features characteristic of creative pedagogies, and Chappell et al.'s (2016) review which identified a series of eight features of creative transdisciplinary science and arts teaching. This action research project explored two of the identified creative pedagogies in particular:

Empowerment, autonomy and agency

Learners and teachers both have a sense of agency and are allowed to express themselves. Students are empowered to act independently and with agency (exerting power), developing and trying out their own ideas.

Risk, immersion and play

Teaching/facilitation creates space for these three processes to occur. A trusting space is developed in which mistakes are possible and failure can be accepted.

AIM OF THE RESEARCH

The study explored the relationship between stories and play in the early years, responding to a series of questions:

- Do children in early years use prior knowledge to influence their play?
- Do children in early years use their memory of stories to influence their play?
- How much do stories influence children's play in the early years?
- How does this look/ sound/ present itself?
- How do we know/can identify that this is from a story to be able to evidence it?

These questions, culminated in the research question: How do stories influence play for children in the early years?

METHODS AND PARTICIPANTS

The participants were 10 nursery and Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) pupils aged between 3 and 5, of mixed gender, mixed ability and from diverse backgrounds.

This action research project collected qualitative data through the following methods:

- Semi-structured observations using thick description to provide rich data documenting children's multi-modal participation in their play.
- Use of the 'Preparing for a Creative Future' wheel which is a data collection tool that was designed for the Penryn Creativity Collaboratives project. Around the edge it includes the five-part definition of creative skills developed during year 1 of the project, with each skill broken down into three detailed sections. Inside the wheel, teachers or students can mark whether they noticed each of the skills being used a little, some, or lots. I used it to help me review video data and to give me a deeper understanding of how the children were thinking and what propelled them to play in that way and/or what were the barriers to creativity.
- Short videos of children playing, selected material from which was transcribed, making a verbatim transcription of the spoken words only.
- Audio recordings, some of which were transcribed as above.
- Children's artwork
- Photographs

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Data analysis was carried out via immersion in all data, followed by transcription of selected audio and film-based data. Photographs, music and artwork were coded using the See, Think, Wonder technique from Harvard Project Zero. All data was then systematically coded using low level through to higher level coding which led to a thematic analysis. This is written up below in this report.

Ethical research practice was ensured by following the ethical guidelines of the University of Exeter ethics committee which are grounded in the British Educational Research Association (2018) guidelines; protocols involved seeking informed consent for all research activity from all participants alongside careful data protection practices.

MAIN FINDINGS Creative Skills

Dialogue and collaboration

There is strong evidence for **dialogue** in the analysis, for example in this extract from a focus group where the children discuss the story of Ella as a child that had just been told to them by visiting author Ella herself. After she left, they chose to draw Ella in one of her various stories and were immersed in their work quite independently and imaginatively. I tried to draw out their thoughts through questioning but what that showed me was that they were living her story in their heads and expressing it through their art. It was this stream of work that generated the most evidence within this theme.



Figure 1: Children demonstrating they are highly engaged during author visit

In one focus group the children decided together that ‘kiss’ was the most important word from the story. I could not have predicted this at all and it quite surprised me, telling me that their own thoughts and experiences were drawn upon dialogically to highlight a word that had a depth of emotion and meaning for them all.

There were also examples of creative dialogues between children, objects and ideas, leading to inventive innovation. For example, one four-year-old saw a suitcase and started to state what was in it, linking it to his own feelings and experiences. He called out: “A book!” “about water!” and was reading it avidly, closely followed by the exclamation of “Santa!” in response to the teacher’s question “I wonder who left it in our park?” Grudin states, ‘We no more “have” ideas than ideas “have” us and indeed the creative process might be simplified if we stopped searching for ideas and simply made room for them to visit.’ (Grudin, 2000, p.6). There were multiple examples including the one described here where dialogic space was made for ideas to ‘visit’.

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There were examples of **collaboration** throughout the data. Working collaboratively gave children confidence in their ideas which is actively encouraged by the adults. The children were working together towards a shared project.

There was less evidence of the children working as a larger **community** for long. They tended to scatter (to make sense of things in their own way) which is developmentally appropriate.

Honing and developing ideas and generating new ideas that matter

There is some evidence of children honing and developing of ideas, however, it was hard to capture these creative skills amongst the participating children. The concept of reflection suggested a verbal or cognitive capacity that was too advanced for the participating children. Ideas were rarely developed since there was a predominance of adult initiated activity, and children's attention was often cut short due to distractions. This meant that there were more examples of innovation than of development of ideas. Likewise, there was only one example of a child thinking about what might happen as a result of their ideas and no evidence of children understanding diverse values. There was one specific example of a child showing their persistence where one of the children said "Are we going to blow this up?" and without waiting for an answer, immediately said "I will blow this up."

In summary, innovation was present, but there was less evidence of developing ideas, and considering ethical issues and understanding diverse values were two areas of the creative skills framework that were age-appropriate to older children. This is in line with the draft creative skills progression framework (Crickmay, Childs & Chappell, 2023) which describes this skill for foundation stage as comprising 'Exploring alternatives and sharing ideas, having persistence.' (p. 35).

Being imaginative and playful and empowered action

I used the definition of imagination from Kenny (1989) cited in Craft (2002) as being the ability to "enable the thinker 'to form new thoughts and discover new truths and build up new worlds'" (p. 80). This description of imagination particularly resonated in an early years context and led me to combine two parts of the creative skills framework together which I felt the definition related to in this context: 'Being imaginative and playful' and 'Empowered action' - the latter including risk taking, immersion and taking action.

We found much visual evidence to create a strong picture of empowered action throughout the action research project. Overall, it is predominantly in the areas of 'immersion' and 'taking action' rather than in 'risk taking.' Data from the creative skills wheel suggested that 4 of the 10 children observed struggled to take risks or go out of their comfort zone. Having taught this age range for many years, I feel it is somewhat related to the pandemic lockdown: we are trying hard in our everyday practice to reinstate this quality with all of our children post pandemic.

The children were acutely aware of their imaginations and how they use them to play, telling us that this is something they enjoy. For example, at the start of the project, one of the children said in a focus group: "I use my imagination when I play with my friends," and another responded, "And with the babies."

An example of imagination built into the layers of play came from an observation, in which a child stated "That's my favourite story too." Then walked away, saying, "I love that story" and went to re-enact some of the story through her play with the babies in the role play area. A second child then realised what she was doing and joined in, while a third child listened and watched, smiling. According to Dunlop (1998), 'narrative is just the surface layer of content, beneath it lots of other layers; attitudes, preferences, emphases, interests' (pp. 13-14). The power of stories to unearth these other 'layers' to instigate play and inspire others is what we often describe as awe and wonder, and a core part of what makes a child a child.

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This similar layering of responses is demonstrated in Figure 1, and was also captured with my notes using a 'See, Think, Wonder' analysis. One of my favourite moments of the whole project was when a student was running at play with a ribbon band.

See: I see a happy little girl in a field with a ribbon hoop held up high, trailing in the wind, running towards the camera.

Think: I think that she is playing a game with her friends and that they are behind the camera.

Wonder: I wonder if she is speaking and if so what is she saying?

Figure 2: See, Think, Wonder

We have many children who choose to keep their words within themselves and it has been powerful professionally to know that there is a deeper understanding of how these children can express their creativity. Our creative skills wheel suggested that 2 out of our 10 children struggled to put their ideas into action, yet through these multi-modal observations, we have been able to look beyond the outer layer and see their creativity expressed and put into action within art, music and less verbal play throughout.

Creative pedagogies

Empowerment, autonomy, agency

All of the students' work used in this action research demonstrate empowerment, autonomy and agency, suggesting that space was made within the teaching practice for children to act independently and with agency. There is an evident sense of self where they have expressed themselves as individuals with each picture and idea being totally different. The independence has empowered them to develop ideas and think about trying new things.



Figure 3: See, Think, Wonder

See: I see a child's drawing an angel with a heart in the middle and large wings overhead.

Think: I think the angel is happy, warm and friendly looking, almost like a fairy godmother.

Wonder: I wonder if the angel is Sadie herself?



Figure 4: See, Think, Wonder

See: I see a child's drawing of a fairy doctor with its helpful hands.

Think: I think how great a thing this is as broken must be quite the nuisance!

Wonder: I wonder will the doctor really be able to fix those delicate wings.

In the drawings above, the children have represented characteristics of warmth and friendliness, wanting to help others in positive ways, and they have made this explicit through their artwork and verbal explanations for the adult to scribe. They have replicated stories in their character and action statements showing us the strong influence that stories have on our children's thinking.

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Risk, immersion and play

The pedagogical approach we have observed ourselves utilising is one of immersion in stories. We read to them, them to us, they read to each other; at home, outdoors, indoors, they listen to audio stories and watch stories through screens, we use drama, explore story sacks and puppet work... it really is a long list! We use key times to ensure that the story is heard, e.g., at the end of the day. Adults utilise their range of voices, tones and actions to support the understanding of the elements of the story. This all helps to make the stories memorable, fun and encourages bonds to flourish since we also talk about our favourite stories and what makes them our favourites.

As an early years practitioner, I think in stories! I think in song too but that's another story! Figure 4 is an example of how this can result in children also immersed in stories, and producing playful drawings like this one, with the mum and two children with their hats on, and the precarious construction of a house in progress.

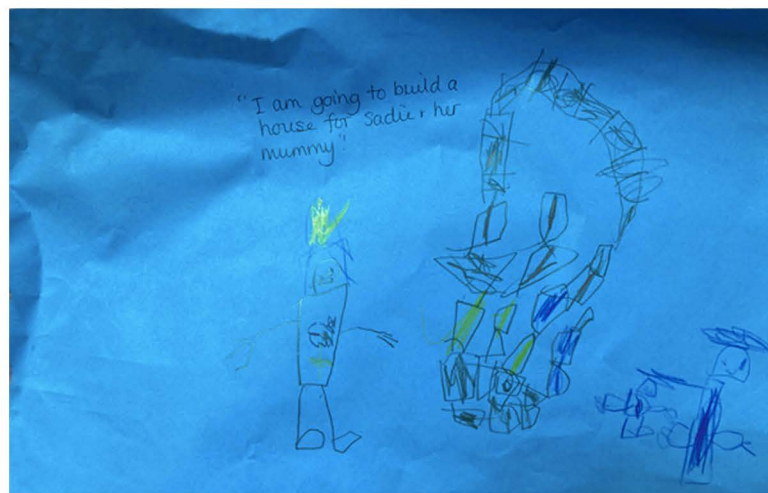


Figure 5: Immersion and playfulness resulting from stories

See: I see a child's drawing of a house, Sadie and her mummy, they both have hats on.

Think: I think how giving and caring this child is.

Wonder: I wonder will the house fall down... or is it stable and safe?

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE PROJECT AND FINDINGS

The significance of the research for our school has mostly been about greater awareness of creativity and its benefits. The size and nature of this action research is not enough to measure or prove the impact of stories on children's play in the early years, but we have nevertheless seen a shift of ethos, thought and reflection on the strong links between story and play generally. Our already rich creative curriculum reminded us of the strength, benefits and sheer joy that this creativity drives. Bringing it to the forefront of our minds and practice has made us value its role within play and ensuring that we plan effectively for creativity in the future.

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The focus on language and communication has been a real strength as children were able to draw on these from the content of the stories used. Emotions, feelings and behaviour were also notably mimicked from the stories that we used and this was a real bonus that boosted the creativity of the children's play as it gave them a way to act that they had not been exposed to before. Our enhanced reflection due to the action research made these elements of stories in children's play obvious to us as practitioners, although they have always been there. For example, I distinctly remember this 'talking in stories' as a child myself when I would go trip trapping over the bridge at the park like the Billy goats gruff: this has stayed with me and I still say these words in my head as an adult every time I go over a bridge. This is an example of a lifelong embedded behaviour that has taken me on an imaginative journey from walking over that bridge to trip trapping over it! This has informed my own pedagogy, now immersing the children I teach in their own trip trapping. I also observe it when children will say in the midst of a class discussion "that's just like... (a character from a book or film)." This tells me that, from an experience in a story, they have shown a deep understanding of that character's needs and traits that has made a lasting impression that they can use this in transferable knowledge and empathy.

Wider Impact

The research raised the profile of creativity throughout the school where we are using the skills framework to recognise and reward creativity. We have embedded the creative framework into our topics and will make this a priority as we create new topic planners throughout the school for 2023/4 onwards. The information will be readily available to families on our website signposting them to the publications of year one and two. Our reward system has taken on the vocabulary of the skills framework, ensuring that children understand when and how they use these elements of learning and that adults who work with them value and choose to reward these important competences. We intend to deliver CPD (Continued Professional Development) to all staff to keep this as a focus and to refresh the vocabulary and raise the profile of the skills framework. This will prepare our children well, not only for transition to Penryn College but also for the workplace. We intend for these creative skills to become embedded in the ethos of the school and its practices.

Challenges

Craft (2002) suggests that 'being imaginative ... may not necessarily be conjured at will' (p. 87). We had to work hard to reboot the mindset of staff and children alike and of course, this did not happen without its challenges. We prompted change through leading by example, adopting the vocabulary of the creative skills framework that soon became embedded as part of the school ethos. We were prioritising creativity as an umbrella over all curriculum areas and rewarding it as a skill within its own right, fundamentally raising its profile. We also introduced the vocabulary of the skills framework to the children themselves, which took time, but we did it by using the language as adults in different everyday situations for the children to mimic and start to use independently. We also used elements of the creative skills as a framework for rewards.

Working with our younger learners, our usual pedagogies already had many of the elements that we explored further through this action research, however, collecting evidence to document this presented its own challenges. Challenges included the environment of free play, space and outdoor learning which made sound tricky and since the children quickly scatter, it was not possible to follow them all. This meant that we missed some of the valuable evidence on how stories influence play in the early years.

Next Steps

A next step in the development of our practice will be to continue our strong and positive links with our industry partner, a local author, who would like to come and write stories and poetry with our youngest children who have been involved in this action research. We were able to see the inspiration and creative response of children through the visitors coming in, so we plan to extend this part of the project and also explore how we can recreate those moments within everyday practice.

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Creative Skills

PENRYN PARTNERSHIP

“Does teaching creativity across the curriculum lead to young people who are better prepared for their future in a changing workforce?”

