Experiments and Encounters

The Extraordinary Ordinary Space

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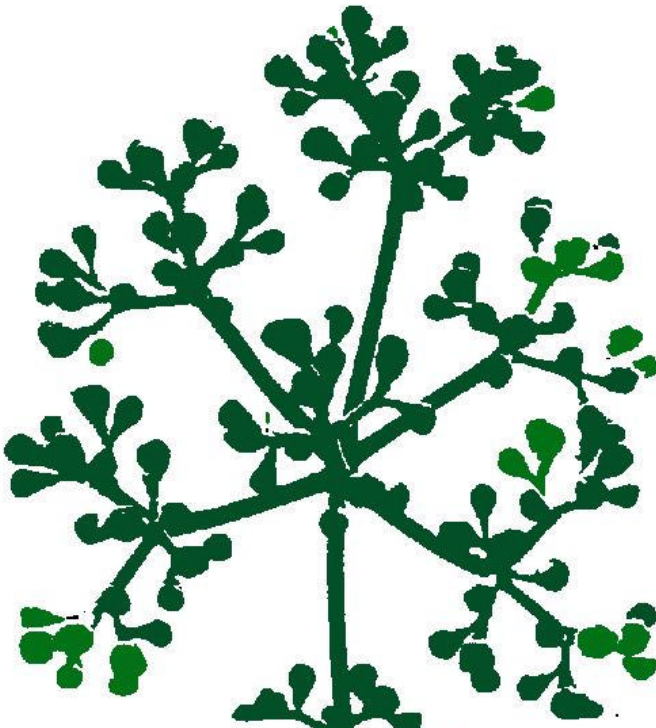

Helen Gibson Nursery School

The extraordinary ordinary space

‘Children need enough space to create over time…’

How do we create a space for the enquiring, competent child?

How can we provide an environment which allows children opportunities to develop and extend their ideas within the everyday life of the nursery?

The logistics of accommodating two cohorts of children – morning and afternoon – means that finding time and space for ideas to be revisited and developed is difficult to achieve. The work of the children in the nursery is routinely curtailed after each session so as to create a fresh space for the next group of children.

This desire for continuity and progression of ideas was the ‘ordinary dream’ that informed the work of the adults in the nursery.

A Wall for Work

The educators identified the construction area of the nursery as a focus for their action research.

The first initiative is the creation of a construction board for both morning and afternoon groups. A vertical space where work can continue and be visible.

By offering this activity to all of the children, the educators are unpicking practice or questioning their existing assumptions that the children need to create independently, and have their work separate from each other. They are offering a sociable learning context to the children.

The morning children respond enthusiastically and the board gradually becomes a huge collage of various materials.

Ben: ‘These are like leaves.’
Lucy: ‘The paper’s so shiny because it’s got oil in.’

The afternoon children are hesitant in approaching the board as the morning children had left it, but soon become engaged in adding to the construction.

Maya is the chief protagonist; ‘Shall I show you what to do? You take this off (removing backing from sticky foam), and then it’s sticky!’

Beth cuts through the same black material; ‘Now you have to stick it up there.’

The morning and afternoon children continue with their free and experimental collage work for a week.

Educator: 'As adults we were beginning to learn that the children could quite happily accept that a creative work could be shared and changed by others. These lessons have made possible a continuity of activity in the nursery, which we did not believe could be achieved before.'

The following week the children find ways to work on higher levels.
Ben: 'Got the chair so I can reach higher.'
The materials introduced to the children create further possibilities.
String motivates the children to tie and wrap.
Cellophane provokes experiments in colour mixing and transparency.
Lucy: 'I'm going to stick this (cellophane) to the wall, I wonder what will happen? Maybe the wall will go red.'

Step-ladders are introduced to the space and become a major feature in the children's play.

Some of the children spend long periods cutting and using string.

As the board fills and activity decreases the educators ask themselves 'do the children think its finished?'

Relaunching the Idea: From Collage to Den

An intervention seems necessary to see if the collage idea is still interesting. Perhaps the board's possibilities have been exhausted by the children? Will another framework offer new opportunities for different types of activity?

The following week a bamboo frame is built onto the construction board as an offering to the children. Building outwards provides the children with a space to inhabit.

As the children come to occupy the space, the educators notice interest groups forming, and deciding on what the space can become. They reflect that having a dedicated space that they manage and control themselves, is a very powerful thing for the group.

Alex: 'We're building a ship. I'm making a flag.'
Maya: 'Alex says it's a ship!.'
Alex: 'Making a ship! We're making a pirate ship. Make the seats. We need seats! The anchors! The anchors! I'm going to make a real one'.
Maya: 'Of course you can't, not unless you have someone to show you.'
Alex: 'I'm going to ask my Daddy.'
Sam: 'Where is the front of it?'
Alex: 'Here it is'
A telephone is found and brought into the ship, the children call each other.
'I'll be Captain Boy!'
'I'll be Captain Girl.'
Laura: 'We could have a dungeon for people.'

The educators discuss levels of intervention deciding that it is important to maintain the children's ownership of their ideas. They support the children's emerging pirate play by encouraging discussion and introducing dressing up materials and pirate props and leave the children with the space to develop their own narrative.

Contagious Ideas: Within and Between Groups

The educators discuss the idea of collaborative work between the morning and afternoon children. Perhaps informing each group of the activity of the other and sharing photographic documentation will bring the ideas into the shared domain? They encourage the children to present their work to their peers within their groups.

Mornings

When the children from the morning group learn that the afternoon group are using the frame as a pirate ship, they also become very engaged by this idea.
They bring together all they know about pirates to develop their play.
Aidan: 'We've found our treasure.'
He and Max gather treasure and are given a treasure chest so that they can store their finds.
Aidan: 'We need to get more treasure don't we.'
Next day Ben asks for a treasure box
'It's full now!.'

Afternoons

The afternoon group introduce wooden bricks.
Ethan: 'We're building a trap, this is the plank.'
Alex attaches a piece of thin material to the top of the frame.
'This will stop us falling off, we can use this to swing down.
It's only a pretend boat.'

Between Groups

During the next session the frame is reinvented as a house.
Alfie from the morning group begins to lay cardboard on top of the frame. 'It's a roof. Don't come in here, it's boiling.'
The afternoon children seeing the transformation of the frame also change its function.
Joshua: 'Excuse me, it's a house now – well it's been a pirate ship for a while.'
Maya: 'It's still a pirate ship!'
The children are given the opportunity to negotiate and reach their own decisions about the construction.

A New Challenge

The adults see that the structure is important to the children and decide to create a stronger, timber version of the same structure as a permanent feature in the nursery.

The children respond to this new development.

Building from watching

Rory: 'It's good.'
Jared: 'This is our castle, let's be turtles.'
Rory: 'I'm red.'
Jared: 'I'm purple.'
Daniel: 'It's a climbing frame.'
Luca starts to decorate it with yellow sticky paper and Michael, Alfie and Mathew join in.
James: 'Daniel says this is a castle.'

Dominic starts to bring the wooden bricks into the space.
Kieran: 'I can't go in!'
Joseph: 'Kieran's going to get trapped in the sellotape!'
Mathew puts strips of masking tape across the horizontal slats so that 'you can put things on top.'
He asks the others not to cut them.
'You can step on this bit here.'

The afternoon children come upon the frame after all the activity of the morning children.
James: 'It's a dungeon.'
A group of children go inside and sit down.
Billy: 'We are all stuck.'
Sam B: 'I need two princes.'
Billy: 'I need one to look after me.'

Sam and Billy dress as princes, Laura is a wicked witch, Maya and Anna A. dress as princesses.
James M: 'Everyone, everyone, escape quickly!'
They escape from the frame.
Laura: 'That's the dungeon, that's what your going to trap me in!'
They all go into the role play room and lie on the floor.

The educators observe that the morning and afternoon group accommodate one another's ideas. The morning children are generally 'the makers', the afternoon children inhabit and develop ideas within the space that has been created.

Children That Work Together

Anna: 'Are you the wicked witch?'
Laura: 'No, I'm a nice princess.'
Joseph J. puts the tape back over the struts. 'I'm making a roof.'
Alfie: 'Come and look ,I've wrapped the sellotape round and round, it feels like a rattle.'

Educator: 'It's an ordinary dream – a daily adventure of what can happen.'

In creating 'the extraordinary ordinary space', the educators permitted open-ended exploration and time for ideas to develop within and between groups.

Engaged in free flow play, the children gave life, in a meaningful way, to the space that was offered them.

The space that the children and educators developed together enabled the growth of 'creativity, sociability, and confidence.'