



### The importance of silence

We became aware of the length of silences during a session, when we listened to the audio recordings. On reflection we realised the inevitability of silences in human conversations and that good relationships are based on the acceptance of them. We came to realise that presence is the other side of silence, and allows for the child to continue comfortably doing

their self-allotted task, knowing that support and assistance is available if wanted, but it is not forced. For us, the picture to the above epitomises this point. The child came of her own accord to continue some of the tying and weaving she had started on a previous occasion. As she arrived, she greeted Iain then just carried on with the task. Iain was available but did not need to interfere.

### Appreciating the transference of learning

A lot of creative learning happened laterally and depended on our ability to allow learning to transfer into other, possibly unrelated, activities. Children felt comfortable in accessing and working freely, without us intervening, unless they asked for it. On one occasion, for example, the children had learnt different ways of knotting, when they were making the roof structure for the den. Making knots obviously caught their interest, and they focussed on this activity for long periods of time, even those children who did not usually have long concentration spans. They kept going back to the activity over many days, practising and learning some quite intricate knots. They kept practising on anything that could be tied and with anything that could tie. For instance, the climbing frames became tied together with skipping ropes.

### Conclusions

The research helped us answer the question we started with. We found that adults play a pivotal role in young children's learning, and that it is important that adults maintain a positive and open attitude in their interactions with children.

Our findings also seemed to demonstrate that the adult does not have privileged information and needs to establish a culture of freedom and partnership.

There was also evidence that the adult's confidence suffuses the child's own, and that it was particularly important to create an understanding that they are both free to fail and, failure is part of the process of learning. We felt that process was much more central than the outcome to both learning and creativity. The findings also showed how adults act as role models even at the most unexpected moment.

For us, the most exciting aspect of our finding is the place of silence in all of the above. Presence is not just about direct intervention; it is also about holding a silent creative space.

We feel this research has validated existing good practice, and has given us the confidence to continue. For instance, it has been a catalyst to fully integrating the outdoor throughout the nursery.

### Further reading

DfEE (1999) *All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education* DfES Publications. Available at: <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/naccce/index1.shtml>

Bilton, H. (1998) *Outdoor Play in the Early Years – Management and Innovation* David Fulton Publishers

Burke, C. & Grosvenor, I. (2003) *The School I'd Like. Children and Young People's Reflections on an Education for the 21st Century* RoutledgeFalmer

Ouvry, M. (2003) *Exercising Muscles and Minds: Outdoor Play and the Early Years Curriculum* London: National Children's Bureau

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National Teacher Research Panel  
engaging teacher expertise

# Silence and presence: How adult attitude affects the creativity of children

  
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This summary was commissioned by the National Teacher Research Panel for the Teacher Research Conference 2006, which explored and celebrated teacher engagement in and with research. All conference materials are available at [www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/ntrp](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/ntrp)

## Aim of the research

The initial aim of the research was to concentrate on children's creativity outdoors. However, analysis of our original data, as well as our mentor's observation that in comparison with other nurseries, we were successful in the way we conducted outdoor activities with children, turned the research on its head. We decided to look at what it was that adults do, that impacts on the quality of children's learning. Specifically we wanted to:

- explore how adult attitude impacts on children's creativity; and
- explore our own approach to outdoor education.

## Dimensions of the study

Merrivale is a small, 60 places LEA-maintained nursery. Children between the ages of 3 and 4 attend part-time. It is close to the city centre in a very built up area, with high levels of air and noise pollution. Amongst the children and staff there is a broad ethnic mix. At the time of writing, 33% of the children attending the nursery were identified as having special educational needs.

Two members of staff, Liz Magraw and Lisa Hayes, who worked in close co-operation with the creative practitioner, Iain Dimmock, initiated the project. However, all members of staff were involved at some point, in particular, for the discussions. The project itself consisted of a series of den-building sessions and was undertaken between January and June 2005 as part of an existing Forest School project. The locations for the project were the nursery ground, the Community Orchard, and Bestwood Country Park.

## Summary of main findings

We started from the premise that everyone, every child, has creativity in them and that it is central to the learning process. It was therefore up to adults to offer children opportunities to discover and access their creativity, and to find their strengths in it.

On the basis of this premise, we offered children opportunities to discover and develop their creativity. Through these our main findings were:

- adult attitude was key to successful and positive child attitude;
- adult attitude was key to supporting children in realising their creativity;
- equal partnership between adults and children developed mutual respect and allowed the adult to pass control to the child in their learning; and
- appropriate use of silence and presence was an integral pedagogical strategy.

## Background and context

Merrivale Nursery School provides an inclusive, exciting and creative approach to the Foundation Stage Curriculum. As a school, we are very committed to outdoor education and since Spring 2004 have been piloting a Forest School project in Nottingham, to offer opportunities to children living in an inner-city urban environment. As a result of this project, we have now opened another Forest school site.

The creative practitioner and the school had worked together before through our Forest School pilot. We found that we had a similar approach to children's learning and to the outdoors and felt that we wanted to delve further into both these areas for a variety of reasons. We wanted to:

- support children in their holistic development;
- spread the 'word' about the benefits of the outdoors in learning;
- be involved in research: we saw it as an exciting way of challenging our thinking and practice;
- have the input of other people; and
- give ourselves a challenge, to stretch ourselves.

In the nursery, there is a seamless flow of activities indoors and outdoors with the children being free to access both throughout the session. All areas of learning (as described in the Guidance for the Foundation Stage) are covered and valued indoors and outdoors. The ethos of the nursery places creativity very highly and views it across the whole child and the whole curriculum. It is integral to the whole approach and not subject-based. We believe that it is intrinsic to learning.

Through our observations of children, our reviews and evaluations, and discussions with parents, we came to realise that being outdoors had a positive impact on children's levels of creativity. So we became interested in doing a deeper analysis, which would give us more insights into children's development and learning processes.

Iain Dimmock, the creative practitioner, was very familiar to the children, had established relationships with them over a period of time and was therefore able to work closely with them very quickly and to use his knowledge to engage them.

## Research methods and strategies

Having noticed that the children were becoming very interested in building dens, we planned a series of sessions to integrate and develop their ideas. This was the vehicle to explore elements of creativity (e.g. Developing problem-solving skills).

The sessions were planned to take place weekly at the three sites (nursery, Orchard and Bestwood). Iain led these sessions with either Liz or Lisa always in 'attendance' supporting but particularly observing. Most weeks these activities were continued/extended by these teachers when Iain was not with us. When the sessions took place, there was a verbal review, which also included other members of staff. We also took some notes down, took photographs and recorded ourselves during sessions. All these were used as evidence to support any findings.

As we pursued the analysis and concentrated on our observations of children, we became increasingly aware that the role of the adult was pivotal to the process. Our initial focus question (To explore how the outdoor affects children's creativity) became redundant: we were still treading in our comfort zone and were only gathering evidence for what we already knew.

Our mentor's timely visit and intervention turned our focus on its head and gave us renewed impetus and a challenge. She asked a very pertinent question: "what do you do that makes the difference?" A seemingly mundane question but it hit at the heart of our thinking and made us realise that a lot of our evidence came from the interactions between adults and children.

After our mentor's intervention, we continued the activities as originally planned but our focus altered completely. We began to observe the adult's interaction with the children. We listened to and watched:

- what the adult said to the children;
- how the adult said it;
- how the children responded; and
- where the adult and children were positioned during the interaction.

Using a mini-disc recorder and a clip on microphone, we recorded the adult's interaction with the children for each session and built up a picture of patterns in communications. In parallel with this, another adult would record proceedings through photographs, annotations and comments. At the end of each day, these would be reflected on by all involved and written comments might be extended by the observer. These would inform what would start the next session.

We concentrated on the dynamics of the relationship. We very rapidly realised that certain patterns were emerging. This defined our focus from then on, and our observations continued to inform our findings.

## Detailed findings

The main finding of this research was that adult attitude is central to child attitude. This confirmed the view that adults act as role models for pupils. However, what was revealed through our research was the depth of this association, and therefore the magnified impact those adults' attitudes have on children.

What we became aware of, with the help of our research mentor, was that it is not just how we behave with children, how we talk to them, but who we are in personality, where we come from, what has made us what we are as individuals. All this seemed to impact directly on the way children received what we offered them. Recurring elements in the interaction between the children and us seemed to support the view that the relationship between teacher and child should be based on *an equal partnership*, and should not be one of dominant teacher and obedient child.

Through analysis of the data, we established the following themes in our teaching.

### Learning to be safe

We found that we communicated how to be safe to children through dialogue, rather than laying down rules.

For instance when D\*\*\*\* picked up the secateurs to cut a stick, she positioned them too close to her other hand. She was asked to stop by the adult at that point to make her aware of the safety issue. Once understood, she was able to continue with her task confidently and competently. This was a lesson learnt naturally for the next time. Through these processes, we found the children very quickly learnt to make their own risk assessment and indeed, ensured other people (including adults) complied with the safety rules.

### Letting the child decide

During the activities, children have the freedom to decide for themselves how much time they spent on a particular activity. For instance, the children decided to adorn the den with woven panels. Some of them spent very long periods of time doing so, but were not daunted when the session came to an end. They continued the next day, where they had left off, whether there was an adult there or not.

### Having the freedom to fail

Freedom to fail was also an important element in helping the children develop. For some of the preparatory activities, for example, we were very aware that, given the length of our sessions, the children would be unable to finish the task. Such was the case, for digging the holes (30cm deep x 4) for the main posts, positioning the posts and pounding the earth back. The children were happy with their major contribution and the fact that Iain would finish it ready for the next day. It was enough to go through the process and understand the purpose. Not finishing could have been seen as a failure on the part of the children and particularly the adults without this understanding.

### Focus on process rather than outcome

Most of the learning took place in the processes rather than purely the outcome. This was exemplified by K\*\*\*\* who, when we were making dens at the Orchard was enthralled with transporting logs and branches to make it. He took an interest in the building, by giving advice as to where logs should go but did not take part in building. He continued transporting logs with his best friend throughout the session, and would transport in all sorts of situations for a long time. The adult attitude was crucial for him to feel confident in choosing just to transport (even when he transported the same log back to where it had started).

### Modelling behaviour

We found that the children assimilated our actions and attitudes. Even the little things that we did registered with the children, and seemed to have an impact on their own actions and reactions. On one occasion, after a very heavy downpour before the children arrived in nursery, there were puddles on the ground. M\*\*\*\* was so excited by the size of one puddle, that she jumped straight into it as soon as she was outside. Having realised what she had done, she turned back looking at the adult following her with a guilty look. The adult smiled and went on to jump in too. This was followed by a great splashing time together with other children joining in.