

REFLECTING OURSELVES

Professional Development Session for 15 staff at Rackham Primary School - 7th April 2008

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This case study was written as a result of an interview with Peter Renshaw in March 2008. The following account aims to focus on the learning and processes encountered during the planning and implementation of a professional development session for staff during an NPD day at Rackham Primary School, Ely, Cambridgeshire.

A Starting Point – Clare

We began our partnership as co-mentors with a conversation about changing curriculum to allow for more creativity.

At the beginning of the REFLECT process this goal seemed to both of us to be beyond the confines of the programme and the resources we could offer, so we decided to keep it simple and aim to allow ourselves some enjoyment and relish in the process of reflection.

Our learning agreement focused on aiming to 'create a window of time to enrich and inspire ourselves as creative practitioners' and 'Prioritise ourselves rather than focus on facilitating creativity in others'. I was captured by the notion of having a conversation without words, which was the focus of our first gathering. This inspired our partnership and gave me permission to play with ideas, objects and images as a way of sharing our perspectives on the world and themes important to our current practice. We began to exchange simple handmade gifts as a way of exchanging ideas and perspectives.

Initial meetings were about getting to know one another, sharing ideas and frustrations about our working lives, supporting one another

through the weight of burdensome yet supposedly necessary administration we both seemed to be engaged in. We gave ourselves some time to experiment with some different ways of communicating with one another and this for me became a pivotal way of anchoring a different professional development relationship with a peer outside my usual working context.

This fair exchange of ideas and perspectives gave us rich grounding as a place to start experimenting with possibilities.

Development of Creative Thinking - Suzanne

The school has been working towards the goal of redesigning the curriculum to offer children a more creative learning process over the last four years. So one of the most significant outcomes of the REFLECT gatherings for me has been finding out about and visiting another school – Chapelbreak Infant School - where a creative curriculum is in place. That school visit – and the time to reflect in the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts - was crucial in providing both Clare and I with insight and inspiration, helping us to plan a two-hour creative experience with my school staff on our next professional development day.

The aim of the 1 hour 45 minute long session on 7 April 08 was to foster the staff's own reflective practice to help us with our journey of reshaping our curriculum and the learning experiences we offer to children. This was the outline:

Developing Creative Thinking

- Philosophy for Children/Thinking skills/Questioning – Suzanne
- Making to realise ideas – Clare
- Sharing practice at Chapelbreak Infant School
- Ways forward for Rackham

Because Chapelbreak's practice is underpinned by thinking skills and the use of philosophy, we decided to start the session with a philosophy session, using Anthony Browne's 'The Tunnel' picture book story as a stimulus. The book has many intriguing images and explores the relationship between a brother and sister as well as their fears. Staff responded very well to the task of brainstorming in pairs which issues they would like to explore, then voting on their preferred two choices from all pairs.

Once the choice was made, questioning and philosophical exploration engaged all members of staff, even those who were passive in response. Feedback suggested that they enjoyed the process and could see how they could use it with children. The idea of philosophy

for children had been previously shared in a staff meeting a few years ago and used with Gifted and Talented Children – but the strategy had not been used extensively. Part of the problem in developing our curriculum has been the sharing of many good strategies and approaches, without embedding them or deciding on a whole school approach. In fact there have possibly been too many strategies to have an impact.

Transformation
WHAT WOULD OUR TUNNEL WORLD BE LIKE?
Something we don't expect, exciting even...

Following the philosophy session, where Clare scribed thoughts, she introduced the idea of using found branches to create a structure that explored the thinking shared during discussion. Small groups of 4-6 had to negotiate and co-operate to develop their ideas.

Groups were encouraged to invent or make something original or never seen before. This process again mirrored Chapelbreak's practice, where children are given opportunities to resolve an idea following philosophical discussions. There is a dedicated artroom (with assigned teacher) called 'The Tardis' available for further exploration of art.



Groups explored the idea of a tunnel, of fear, of a shelter or created creatures formed from trees and branches. Staff really appreciated having the opportunity to work on a creative task and have expressed a desire to have more sessions like this one. They worked well to represent their ideas and could describe and evaluate what they had created.

This part of the session was followed by a sharing of Chapelbreak practice and photos taken on our visit – particularly of the art room. Staff were keen to know more about how teachers planned and how

they covered the National Curriculum within this structure. Unfortunately, Chapelbreak preferred for us to avoid taking copies of planning, suggesting that schools should develop their own models. So since the professional development day, Year Co-ordinators have expressed a desire to visit the school themselves, so that they have a better understanding of how they might move forward in their planning and teaching.



(Images from Chapelbreak Infants school visit)

As I had recently attended a Deputy Headteacher's conference where a local school had shared their own approach to redeveloping the curriculum, I also shared this model – which had some ideas for re-organisation based on the Foundation Stage curriculum but was still probably a little prescribed.

Staff were energised by the creative experience and so very receptive to change and positive to try to further redevelop our curriculum. In the afternoon of the Professional Development day we were brainstorming School Development Plan objectives for the next two years, and each group prioritised a creative curriculum.



The challenge now is to harness this enthusiasm before the pressure of workload swamps it. In both schools considered, extensive time was

provided for key members of staff to consider how the organise the curriculum and planning. The Senior Leadership team at Rackham have met and agreed that Year Co-ordinators will visit Chapelbreak and be given time in July to have a go a redeveloping a more creative curriculum for the coming year. There will also be whole staff discussion during the summer term to involve others in the process and keep them informed.

Staff are keen to further develop their understanding of how to use strategies such as philosophy to promote creative thinking, and a staff meeting time has been allocated, with Clare planning to lead.

The experience of being involved in the Reflect project has given me the opportunity to re-evaluate the way I work with adults and children and reappraise the way we go about trying to embed new initiatives without enough thought and development time. This Professional Development day session was very well received and gave time for staff to experience what we were considering and to reflect on the way our teaching currently limits the creative experience for children. Most importantly, it left them eager to try and change learning opportunities.

Through the Tunnel and beyond - Clare



For me the use of Anthony Browne's book the Tunnel as a stimulus for discussion was an inspiring way of making connections and analysing aspects of the emotional investment involved in establishing a productive climate for creativity.

What would make you go in the Tunnel?
To escape
Seek safety
Pushed into it
Way things come to mind

The imagery used and referred to during the session seemed relevant and parallel to the barriers that can hold us back when facing the unknown perceived dangers and fears relating to change in an often-overcrowded primary school curriculum. At the end of the session Suzanne had made her vision clear, that the schools curriculum was to

make a significant and meaningful change, to embrace more scope for creative thinking.

UNKNOWN
If you cant see way through
Imagination
FEAR OF WHAT MIGHT BE THERE



My role working with Suzanne in the professional development session involved spending much time supporting and capturing the development of ideas with words, photographs and objects. The curation of spaces before, during and after the session was important in engendering an active, constructive atmosphere where ideas could be built upon and shared.

My role became to take notes of conversations, record activity and then feed this back afterwards in my own way, enabling space for my expression and interpretation of events to feed into the process as it evolved. The session for me concluded when I was able to present Suzanne with an A2 visual record of images and text that formed 'notes' from the 7 April session for the staff room wall. I hope that these records will act as a reminder, stimulus and tool for reflection to deepen the process of the session, hopefully working on a more profound level than that of the usual CPD sessions encountered on 'traditional' NPD days.



What have we learned? - Clare

Impact- the session consolidated our partnership and enabled us to test the invested trust we had placed in one another. It provided a deeper insight into the workings of the school to build our partnership on. Understanding the staff is important and continues to help Suzanne and I share a common language whilst retaining our personal perspectives.

The session has led me to continue to work with Suzanne and the school staff as I feel even more deeply committed to helping support them with their goal to free up the current curriculum. Maintaining a professional dialogue that supports and does not exploit is something I think we have remained aware of throughout our partnership as co-mentors. I will need to continually balance this personal connection with the school to ensure that my freelance status remains fully valued rather than 'consultation for free' in a resource limited environment but I trust and respect that the school will honour this.

I see it as good progress that although staff were inspired by the making aspect of the session what they actually want is not a request for more practical arts based that hold some kind of creative 'recipe' or formula of teaching for creativity. This could have easily been fulfilled and the practice could still remain the same for all. Investing more time to work as a staff together to evolve a curriculum themselves will nourish and inspire the school with the support of my and Suzanne's perspectives as needed on particular themes and areas of development. This will hopefully mean there is more scope for true transformation of some kind.

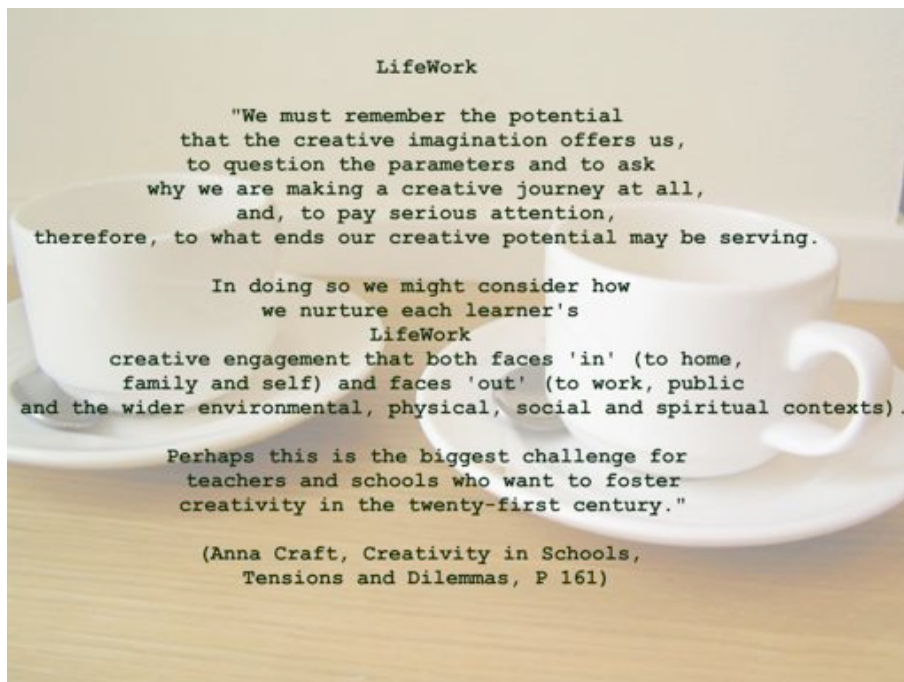
Applications and adaptations - the session has enabled me to feel more confident articulating some of the language of philosophy in my day to day work and continues to feed my interest in finding penetrating questions that inspire and feed enquiring minds. The session framework I would use and adapt again and I enjoyed using simple democratic strategies to help edit and refine a thinking process in a group. For me, using counters to choose from an idea or line of thought was a useful technique for forming consensus in a group whilst still encouraging divergent thinking and novel connections to be brought to life.

I aspire to support Suzanne and her school with their own reflections on the life of the school beyond the initial impact of this session on creative thinking. I hope to continue to refine my skills at working with groups of teachers and staff and continue to evolve and question my own practice, tools and language.

The experience reiterates for me the importance of giving more time for developing deep and potentially profound learning experiences through conversation. By personally connecting in partnership and allowing a creative dialogue to take place I have allowed myself to listen and make, to value the impact of my own practice and share insights with those who have had different experiences.

Protecting time for finding our own questions in a 'tunnel world' seems to me now even more important, providing valuable spaces

to reflect ourselves



Hate the idea of being in a 'small' space
Constricted

What do you get to after the tunnel?

Notes:

Rackham C.E. Primary School is a larger than average primary school with 319 pupils on roll. The majority of children live locally and are of white British origin. The intake is mixed with some from quite affluent areas and some low income families. A below average percentage of pupils are from ethnic minorities and a well-below average number of these pupils speak English as a second language. There are a small number of pupils from Traveller families. The proportion of pupils with special educational needs is below average. 21% of the school roll is currently from out of catchment areas. There are two small classes in the foundation stage and three classes in each mixed year group of years 1 / 2, 3/ 4, 5/6, averaging 32 children per class. Year teams plan in these groups of two or three. There are 9 full time teachers and 6 part-timers who share classes and support PPA time.

Eastfeast brings experienced creative practitioners (professional artists, gardeners and others) into schools to work in partnership with teachers. Working with the teachers and exploiting a variety of outdoor opportunities, we develop the twin concept of the open creative classroom and the creative curriculum.

Starting in 2005 with a year long pilot programme at Aldeburgh Primary School in Suffolk, Eastfeast continues to evolve, in partnership with a growing number of schools in East Anglia, through a sequence of linked but independent creative learning programmes. Culminating in a celebratory feast for the local community, the artists enable the children to express their thoughts and experiences in a range of art forms through the growing cycle of seasons.

Joint professional development of teachers, artists and other creative practitioners, eg gardeners, is a key characteristic.

For more information about Eastfeast, our current work and who supports us please visit www.eastfeast.co.uk