



CASE STUDY

Elements: Supporting creativity in Early Years settings across Somerset

Setting: Bizzikids Nursery, Taunton TA1 5BQ

Type: Nursery

Lead EYP name: Helen Litten

Artist name: Deborah Westmancoat

EY Advisor: Lorraine Davey

Artform: Visual

Term date: Autumn 2016

Average number of children and age: 10, ranging from 12 months to 4 years (the same children attended every session)

Average number of adults and type: 3 EY practitioners from setting

Research question: "There is no wrong or right in art making. How can we build confidence in the children and adults in this subject?"

Context:

Bizzikids is a small setting with an intimate 'family' feel. The staff work hard to provide a range of interesting activities for the children and are good at directing activities based upon the children's interests and observations. When I first went in there was a definite concern that good art was 'difficult', and that the measure of success was a finely finished end product. To be a good artist, the staff felt that being traditionally skilled in draughtsmanship and handling paint was essential, and that special equipment would be required. Although all staff stated they are not talented in this area, they were very open to approaching the subject from a different direction and learning more.

Activity:

Our first session was very free, making a 10 metre long river on paper using pigment and a variety of non standard art tools such as large syringes, watering cans, plastic bottles, decorating rollers etc. The children were encouraged to chose and mix paint themselves (something they had not done before), fill trays and apply pigment to the paper in any way they chose. Staff were on hand to support but did not direct the activity. All ten children engaged with the art play for the whole session and found different ways to explore the materials, both independently and in cooperation with each other. Through talking to the children about their play I learned that the natural world was of great interest to them, along with investigation into the nature of materials. Cobwebs, spiders, leaves, sticks and puddles, all suggested by the children, would come to play a large part in our sessions.

From this exciting start a pattern emerged for the remaining sessions. Each morning started with us all getting dressed for the outdoors and going on an adventure walk. The walks varied in location and theme, and we took bags with us to bring back any found materials the children were interested in. The children wore wellies and waterproofs and each carried a small metal bucket which they could fill with sticks, leaves, conkers, puddle water etc, taking ownership of their collecting. During these walks, meandering at a pace the children were happy with, the adults observed which things drew the children's interest and supported further exploration.



Exploring puddle water on an adventure walk and seeing how pigment can dissolve and move around a surface when wet.

On one notable walk, a child became completely engrossed in puddles and spent a considerable time filling their bucket with puddle water and tipping it out again. We managed to carry a bucket of the puddle water back to Nursery and made this part of our art making session, filling a tray and helping the child to jump into the 'puddle' and make splashy footprints across paper. During another walk the children expressed interest in spider webs so we created an enormous brightly coloured woollen web in the middle of the Willow Cathedral in Longrun Meadows. By doing so, the children could experience being both the spider and the fly, spinning, weaving and also being trapped in a web. At one point the children developed a game called "Under...Over..." where they attempted to get from one end of the web to the other, physically negotiating the woollen strings and saying the words out loud as they went. The drawings made in response to the activity were insightful, perhaps because the children had used their whole body to make and explore with, and so 'knew' their subject better than those of us who merely 'look'. It seemed that incorporating elements of our adventure walks into our art making helped the children to embed their outdoor experiences in creative and meaningful ways.

Research findings:

The artist:

Through experience we learned that the best kind of art making in our sessions stemmed from free exploration and play within a supported, rather than guided, environment. The only session which we all felt did not work quite as well was the making of a large spider sculpture, which had

a far more directed approach to creating, with a defined end result. The older children enjoyed this but the younger children struggled to maintain interest and wandered off after a while to play with other things. We felt this was because the older children could envisage the end result more easily and work towards it, whereas the younger children were more focused on enjoying that moment, and the active process of making. Being aware of this helped us to be sensitive to the needs of every age group and plan our future sessions to be fully inclusive.



Photo © Deborah Westmancoat

Setting up a tripod and swinging a strung up bottle full of diluted paint to see what patterns emerge. A game was created spontaneously, swinging the bottle from one to another. Who would be holding it when the paint ran out?

By the end of the sessions I was delighted to see how the language the staff used referencing art had changed. At the beginning of the sessions a lot of negative phrases were used “I can’t...”, “I’m no good at...”, “we are not artists, you’ll soon see...”. By the end this had changed to positive statements such as “why don’t we.....” “How about we have a go at.....” “I really enjoyed it when we.....”, “I can do this.....”. Staff were enthusiastic throughout the project, and towards the end started to suggest activities and contribute ideas in planning meetings to move things forward. The children too had gained both in confidence and ability to concentrate, and developed much more of an inquisitive, experiential, investigative approach to their making.

Bizzikids:

“Prior to the sessions our vision of art was the end product. We now understand art is a whole process. This understanding has developed our confidence in art, that there is no wrong or right and that the journey has no wrong or right. We learned that each child needed ownership of their creation and it was OK to be wrong. One week we made one large sculpture and although some children were engaged not all were. Our children were confident outside of nursery before the sessions, but now each child enjoys choosing items to bring back from adventures and create their own art. This in turn has developed children’s interests and confidence in art.

We have discovered that art is valuable in supporting learning areas and our understanding of the children, including how each child learns, when we followed children’s interests and planned in the moment. We found that art sessions increased each child’s concentration and the greatest increase was with the younger age range, where everyone was involved for the whole

session. We have found the art sessions valuable and we have already planned continuing this on.”

Conclusion:

It is clear from our experience that building confidence in the adults in a setting makes a significant impact on the children. Every child felt secure and free to experiment in their art making because the adults, understanding there was no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ way to make, were more comfortable with the making process. This in turn led to the adults making positive and encouraging statements when speaking about art making, leading the children to adopt the same positive language in their approach. When the adults had fun making art, the children joined in and had fun too. Art became something we all did together, not just a directed activity for the children.



Using collected conkers and pigment mixed by the children to create experiential Autumn paintings.