

GROUNDSWELL ARTS EVALUATION

The Talking Room PILOT –South Haringay Infants case study

Beginning

Our initial research and development work was based in South Haringay Infants School with the two reception Classes, and with the support and management of Liz Nairn. Our approach was to start with a series of focused observations in the classroom, looking primarily at how the children communicated through interaction and play. We also had discussions with staff in which we looked at the ECAT (Every Child a talker) agenda, Ethnic minority achievement, and Pupil voice initiatives, all areas the school had identified as priorities.

These original conversations and observations were the basis from which we conceived and designed the “The Talking Room” a multi sensory set of interactive cupboards, that would inspire curiosity, imagination and communication.

In May 2009 after presenting our ideas to the school we were offered an empty room to transform into the first ever “Talking room” enabling us to pilot our project.



Making it happen

One of our main goals with the “Talking Room” was to create an environment that felt welcoming, safe and relaxing.

We achieved this through the use of natural environmental materials and colours on the walls, ceiling, and cupboards. Also the inclusion of tactile fabrics, soft furnishings, blankets and cushions, plants, feathers, and baskets placed around the room. This also built on the learning around “Communication Friendly Spaces” that was already being developed by school staff.

Secondly we wanted to achieve a “Curiosity shop” feel in the design and intrigue of the cupboard units. We created a vast array of cupboard doors that opened in a variety of ways, each were different shapes and sizes and each opened to reveal unexpected weird and wonderful objects, things to touch, smell, look at, and hear. Many of these were natural objects such as stones, shells, fossils, gems, birds nests, seed pods etc...Cupboards would also include some objects that were a bit strange and scary or that might generate confusion and excitement.



The series of 54 cupboards also included a number of technological cupboards that allowed you to view images of the natural environment, insects, animals, volcanoes etc... or that would play sounds or speak to you as you opened the door.

The build itself took 2 weeks and we were able to incorporate many objects and materials found in the school into the room – we also integrated props and materials from the 'CFS' family bags into the room during the week of the project.



The Project Delivery

We worked with the 2 reception classes to plan and schedule project activity in the room over the course of 1 week. Sixty children spent time in the room throughout the week experiencing a minimum of 30 minutes to explore the cupboards, and 18 children formed 3 core groups who completed the whole 4-day project, the following is a breakdown of activity throughout the week.

Day 1 – Exploring the room; Developing imaginative play, investigating the cupboards, encouraging talk and questioning.



Day 2- Introducing technology; Core groups were encouraged to identify favourite cupboards and objects, they were then introduced to cameras and sound recorders with which they took photographs and spoke about their favourite objects and cupboards in the room.

Day 3 – Venturing out and Sound recording; Core groups travelled to different locations in the playground and school building they were given kits for exploring which included magnifying glasses, mirrors and bags for collecting. Children then gathered and found objects around the school and talked about them using their microphones, these sessions ended back in the “Talking Room” where they were encouraged to tell everyone what they had found, then place their new discoveries inside the cupboards.



Day 4 - Photography; Core groups were given cameras to capture their experience of the school environment; they were encouraged to follow their own interests in and around the school. Again the session ended with by returning to the room and discussing and sharing what they had discovered and photographed.

Day 5 – Sharing; The sounds and images recorded by the children were uploaded into the interactive cupboards

Parents and reception children took part in a special sharing assembly with 20 parents attending. They were then invited back to the room to see how the installation had changed throughout the week to reflect the children’s work.

Sustainability Across The School

The following week small sessions of children from year 1 and 2 visited the room to view the installation.

Inset was held for all school staff to discuss further ideas and uses for the room and also demonstrates the upkeep and maintenance and ease of use of all of the technology in the room.

We were able to work with 10 parents throughout the week of the project with several of them wanting to take a lead on developing further work in the room in the future.

Project Aims

As Groundswell Arts our personal short- term aims for this piece of work were to be able to

- Increase opportunities for talk amongst 4 and 5 year olds.
- Explore a variety of languages for communication i.e. through play, exploring different stimulus, and through the use of visual and sound technology as alternative languages or communication tools.
- Explore the notion of transforming a space in the school for dedicated small group work focused around talking, which could then be adapted and used by the school for further work either by staff or families in a sustainable way beyond the project.
- Through multi- sensory exploration and play introduce a wide variety of new and exotic materials and stimulus to open up new language and ideas.

Long-term aims

- To create bespoke offers of work that reflects the needs of people working in and accessing children's centres and foundation stage settings in the borough of Haringey.
- To develop and tailor other offers to other settings based on the successful aspects of our pilot with South Haringay Infants.
- To develop an offer of INSET training for schools projects, which would include the use of interactive graphic and sound technology specific to early years, and other aspects of the best practise around promoting talk and communication that have developed as a result of this pilot.

Project Outcomes

Responses From Children

Children were asked each day when they went back to the classroom what they saw in the room. Here a collection of their comments as collected by staff.

“ We opened doors and a bird squeaked at me and Frank.”



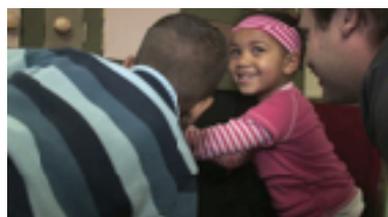
“ I opened lot’s of doors and saw some spicy things to smell and smelled lavender.”

“I opened a tent.”



“I saw a snake in one drawer, I saw shells.”

“I went out and I had my magnifying glass. I saw lot’s of things, I saw things that were big and small, I saw loads of flowers.”



“I put a hundred things in my bag.”

“There was this talking room with little doors you are allowed to open them up and you are allowed to go up the stairs, you get to see a man who took your picture.”



“There was a fluffy carpet.”

“Guess what you see in the talking room you can’t believe your eyes.”

“ In the drawer you can hear a baby and music – bumble-bee music.”



“We had seaweed hand-cuffs and we put Gareth in the jail.”

“ I looked in boxes there were noises and letters.”

“ I went to the room and a bumblebee stung my hand.” (Response from a child who had not yet visited the room)



Responses from parents

Parents and their interaction and feedback about the room throughout the project was also key to the development of the space, and this new way of working in the school. Although there were challenges in getting a core group of parents to commit to joining in the whole process we were able to have parents attend a number of sessions and in particular the photography day really benefited from having a number of parents in attendance.

Parents got a lot out of working with their own children as well as supporting other children in the process. We believe the school will also be able to gather momentum in continuing to engage new parents with the space.

Suzie – (Suzie was a parent who spent 2 full days working with us on the project)

“I thought the Talking Room” was a very successful project, the children were enthralled by it when they walked in and it was interesting how each group of children reacted differently.

It provided a real insight into how young children behave when they are given free reign to explore in a curious yet safe environment “

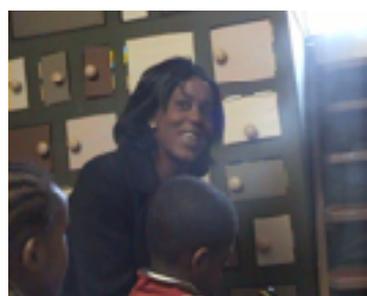


“The most surprising thing about the project for me was how delighted the children were to see photos of each other during the assembly presentation. Pictures were taken by the project leaders throughout the week and when these were shown on the big screen during the special assembly children became unbelievably excited – It surprised me as they see their friends every day but to see them in a different context really thrilled them”

“ A very positive aspect of this was how The Talking Room did inspire children who are often very quiet in class, (maybe because they don’t speak English very well) expressing themselves more freely. It was interesting to watch the other children allow the more quiet children to speak when it was their turn rather than jump in with their own thoughts”

Joshua’s Mum – (participated with her son on day 4)

I am a parent from South Haringay Infants School who has participated in The Talking Room Project with my son and I would like to share some of my experience with you



When I first heard that “The Talking Room” was coming to South Harringay Infants my first thought was; “It’s just going to be a room for parents and carers to come with their children to spend time learning and receiving information about communication skills” To my surprise it was much better than just sitting down retrieving information.

There were lot’s of hands-on activities for adults and children to participate in this was done by constant interacting, communicating, listening and expressing. The children had fun whilst learning communication skills.

I think the “Talking Room Project” is a great methodology for young children as well as foreign language students who find expressing and communicating their points of view difficult.

Zack’s Mum (Zack had only been in the school 2 weeks she participated day 4 with her son)



“The first time I entered the talking room with my son we both explored the room, it was full of educational children’s games there were digital cameras for each child inside a bag which also contained a microphone and a magnifying glass these could be used outside in the playground and they could explore whatever they found interesting from insects to planes in the sky, also the children used the magnifying glass to explore interesting features of what they chose to discover.



After that they returned to the room and listened to each other and what the microphone had recorded, they could explain what they had seen and after a few days would see some of their photos as well. My child said excitedly “I want to come here all the time because I like the camera, the microphone and the tent!”

Responses from staff

We worked very closely with staff in both decisions around the design and the delivery of the project. Staff also linked the project directly to their ongoing curriculum and was making links through everything that occurred back to sessions in the class the whole time.

Sinead – Orange Class teacher

“The project was professionally set up by the artists who had listened observed and understood the needs of the age group they were to work with

Background knowledge of schemas and child development was evident on the way they handled the children.

All children regardless of language acquisition, social skills, or academic ability accessed and benefited the project.

Children on the speech and language register were highlighted to the artists in advance and resources were appropriately allocated to allow for different forms of communication to happen.

The project was a real success and we are now looking forward to using the room as a part of every-day life in the school.”

Angela- Orange Class Nursery Nurse

“Participating in the Talking Room Project turned the school into a new place to explore

Places and resources were investigated with new vigour it was great to see artists, parents, staff and children sharing in child centred working with the children engaging in imaginative play with natural objects.

The room will become a valuable resource for the school allowing the project to become embedded through the school.

The use of IT to communicate the children’s ideas and feelings was inspirational!

The children benefited from small group work with lots of adults listening to their ideas and feeding on.”

Liz Nairn - Project Coordinator

“The experience of being in the room included all the senses and a range of emotions and was able to involve all children including those at the very early stages of learning English. They developed their skills and understanding through being more fully and freely involved in a small group in this safe space and increased their ability to communicate with not only their peers but also other adults.

Being involved in the project gave children the opportunity to gain additional practical skills, for example how to operate a camera. The project also gave the children time and space to explore the local

environment and communicate their ideas in a range of ways. Observing the children exploring the 'curiosity cupboards' and expressing their thoughts and interests provided unexpected insights into their capabilities. Parents and teachers were able to see individual children in a new light.

One Kosovan boy who rarely speaks in class became 'the expert' describing what he had seen in the little cupboards to the other children in the group. One girl recently arrived in the UK from Tibet was observed running up to other children in the group saying 'Come' and taking them to see the exciting things she had seen behind the cupboard doors."



Groundswell Arts Evaluation

As an organisation we have been very pleased with the outcome and feedback from the initial pilot as a result we are now developing a series of offers to be made initially across the borough of Haringey and then further a field based on the most successful aspects of what has worked on this project.

We found the project was at it's most successful on the days when we were able to also engage higher numbers of parents and adults in each session and we are also researching strategies for settings to find this easier to achieve particularly if parental engagement is an important aspect of a settings priorities.

We are aware that not every setting will have available or be able to commit the resources to changing a room therefore we are currently exploring a series of different offers which can be explored with settings To enable them to carry out different aspects of this project and tailor our services to suit their needs.