

Project **Engaging Parents Creatively
in the Foundation Stage**

School **Manor and Star Primary Schools**

Borough **Newham**

Outline **The project took place in Manor and Star Primary Schools in spring 2006. Storyteller and writer Pauline Stewart and artist Auriol Hertford were engaged by Discover, the project partner, to work with nursery and reception classes, dividing seven days between the two schools. The aim of the project was to use stories, music and visual art in combination and in doing this to bring children, teachers, classroom assistants and parents together.**

Engaging Parents Creatively in the Foundation Stage Manor and Star Primary Schools

Creative Partnerships London East and South case study



About Manor and Star Primary Schools

Manor and Star are primary schools in the Stratford and Canning Town neighbourhoods of Newham. They are both located within an area of high economic and social deprivation. Star is a large three-form entry school and Manor is two-form entry. Pupils in both schools come from very varied ethnic and cultural backgrounds, with many of them speaking Bengali, Yoruba and Somali as their home language. There is high mobility of children during their time at school; many of them are entitled to free school meals; and there is a significant number of children with special educational needs.

Although many pupils begin their formal education with lower than average levels of attainment, recent Ofsted reports have commended both schools for making good progress.

The schools have worked in partnership for a number of years to explore ways in which the arts can support learning across the curriculum. Teachers have worked together to develop links between different curriculum areas and the pupils have shared their learning with their peers from each school. The schools have participated jointly in a number of Creative Partnerships funded projects including one that linked dance to work in science through kinaesthetic learning.

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Project context

The project was devised by Manor and Star with Discover – an independent organisation in Stratford that provides an interactive story trail where children aged 0-11 can play, explore, make up characters and contrive their own tales. The original artists commissioned by Discover had to pull out of the project and this resulted in a number of problems. There was also a delay in confirming budgets for the project. This meant that some planning meetings had to be curtailed, some decisions had to be made by email and textiles did not play a role in the project, as the schools had at first anticipated. Due to budget restrictions the ‘take home’ pack of art materials given to children at the end of the project was less elaborate than the artists had originally hoped.

The central aims, however, remained clear. These were to increase parental and community involvement in children’s work; to produce a noticeable impact on the commitment to learning of those involved; and to raise achievement in the foundation stage. Work on a previous Creative Partnerships project (cross-curricular dance with dance artist Stephen Mason) allowed older children to discover that sharing in an imaginative undertaking gave them powerful opportunities to learn as individuals while enjoying the feeling of being part of a purposeful group. This project was intended to extend this awareness through textiles and storytelling across foundation stage and key stage 1.

The schools wanted children to work with a visual artist and a storyteller who could reflect the diversity of the local community. The schools consider it important for small children to be involved with themes of cultural identity and living history. They wanted the visual and the narrative strands to be closely interwoven; they hoped that children would come to realise that creativity and imaginative language are not simply found in museums or printed books but can be made by people like themselves. The schools also wanted parents to be involved in all stages of the project.

The two schools saw the project as part of a much wider process of change in which they collaborate in order to redefine the ways in which the curriculum is delivered and the central importance of creativity is reinforced. They aim to encourage parents – some of whom have expressed [to the writer] a daily struggle to maintain their sense of self-esteem in a vast and potentially overwhelming city – to feel that they are not just recipients of what schools offer but active participants who can add ‘excellence and enjoyment’ to their children’s learning. These aims are also central to those of Discover and, of course, Creative Partnerships.



Engaging Parents Creatively in the Foundation Stage

The project followed slightly different patterns with different classes. Altogether seven nursery and reception classes took part, with 14 teachers and teaching assistants involved and about 20 parents in each school. Parents were given an open invitation to take part, and were welcome to stay for however long they could manage. Some dropped in for a couple of hours, while others stayed all day.

It began with children and adults forming a large circle, while Pauline led warm-up sessions that used rhymes and songs, with everyone acting out the shapes and meanings of poems and practising ‘volume control’. A talking parrot sang the children’s names, and Pauline emphasised that a good story needs more than a single teller – it needs listeners and contributors. Anansi was introduced as a character who travels around the world, and children named many places he might have visited. People made eight finger spider shapes and passed these around the circle; they rolled a ball of wool to create a web; they sang Incy Wincy Spider with lots of movement and body percussion.

Back in the classroom, fizzing with spider ideas, they gathered in smaller groups and, under Auriol’s direction, began to make spiders from tights or crushed newspapers, with pipe cleaner legs. They talked about the number eight and its ability to become ‘two fours’ or ‘four pairs’, with parents leading some of this discussion within their groups. They made spider prints, dipping fingers on an inkpad to make a fingerprint body and drawing legs of varied lengths with the slogan ‘twist and bend’.

Art and storytelling took regular turns within the programme. Children worked with Pauline and with parents on the beginning, middle and end of a story incorporating an adventure for Anansi. Props including fabric, dolls, flowers, musical instruments, hats, plates, fish were used to suggest ideas for the narrative. As the story structure emerged, some children began to make larger prints. They were introduced to the idea (and the terminology) of a ‘monocopy’, and began to make large pictures into which their printed images fitted.

Some worked on tables and some on the floor, with the whole classroom full of purposeful groups working busily. Some children added alphabetical letters that stood for a character or notion within the story. When the paper was peeled off to reveal the monocopy, there were delighted cries as the children witnessed the magical effect of the technical fix they had themselves used to create an image.

Anansi was described as going to places like the Sea of Surprises, Hatland or the Waterfall of Words – these became the source of more artwork in which the metaphorical richness of the children’s ideas was given a concrete form. Some made hats for Anansi, decorated with feathers, glitter and pieces of fabric; others used stencils and glitter to create the waterfall; others made fabric flowers, with the calyx, petals, pollen and stem all picked out from different textiles and embellished with glitter.

Parents were closely involved with their own and with other people’s children throughout the design stage. Some created a giant web with a two metre diameter of canes around which was woven ten concentric rings of string. The spider models, around 60 in number, were distributed about this huge construction to become an installation for the classroom. Parents and children were in constant dialogue, with reassurance, jokes and helpful technical advice flowing between them. Some parents used the opportunity to encourage children to think more closely about their own design ideas, asking them how they wanted to make it.

The resulting stories and artefacts reflected this nice balance between following up Pauline and Auriol’s ideas for stimuli and customising them according to individual taste. Auriol had spoken about how colours and shapes can go in families; Pauline had spoken of the listeners’ role in helping a story grow. The end products showed many signs of the way children and parents had taken on the concepts provided by the artists and made them their own.



Impact and outcomes

The project was described by teachers as ‘very timely’ and ‘a practical application of educational theory. It was good for language, mathematics and creativity, and also for the fine motor skills needed for physical development’. One teacher especially valued the fact that ‘it reinforced and extended literacy’. Meeting Pauline, a published author, and seeing her books while making up a story with her was of great value. Teachers were able to follow up the work in a variety of ways, encouraging the children to make up new spider stories, inventing spiders with new names, making new pictures and designs to illustrate the poem Incy Wincy Spider and making their own laminated book using desk top publishing.

Children’s imaginative play was also given a boost. They did lots of drama, wearing the hats and becoming someone else. One teacher said their planning had been influenced in a more child-centred direction, with fewer parts of the week being determined in advance and more being shaped by the children’s spontaneous interests. One girl has shown a special new confidence and interest in class work, using props to tell stories – directly ascribed by the teacher to her mother’s participation in the project. ‘It was a very adaptable project’ and the children have taken on the idea of discussing the beginning, middle and end in their story composition.

Another teacher described the involvement of parents as ‘very positive’, and greatly enjoyed ‘seeing all the adults and children having fun together’. She herself learned some very useful skills for making designs and three-dimensional creatures. Teachers liked the way the story ‘came out of what they [children] had made, and the way parents were able to

help directly in their children’s learning, taking part practically – a great experience’. It was especially gratifying to ‘see children learning with other adults who are not their parents’, and getting involved in work on the table and floor, ‘making all the classroom a place to learn’.

The artists were pleased with the results that came from using a theme (Anansi the Spider) they hadn’t really tried before and gratified that it proved to be so flexible and productive a starting point. They were also happy to have worked with one another for the first time and see possibilities for collaborative work in the future. They are aware of the fact that the project was intended by the schools to focus more closely on work with textiles and that this pointed to the need for planning and defining objectives with schools more closely.

The artists felt, in retrospect, that an alternative approach might have been to spread the entire project across the year groups – for example, beginning the story with year 1 children, developing it with reception classes and finishing in the nursery. This would enable the youngest children to do a lot of hands-on working, contributing to a concept that slightly older children had planned, allowing children and parents to see how a story is built up and how their contribution fits into a larger whole, and making it possible for the story to change direction and have alternative endings.

This might in turn help with the perennial dilemma of process versus product – of the need to spend what is often limited time teaching children new skills and in the same period ensuring they finish with work that can be displayed and exhibited in a finished form. If the emphasis is on process, parents are able to spend more time using reflective language with their children, discussing alternative ways of achieving similar ends and achieving depth as well as breadth. If product is more important, there will be a big sense of achievement, but possibly the learning is less secure.

Parents were very enthusiastic about what their children got from the project and what they gained themselves. For many English is not their first language and quotes included here are verbatim. One mother said: ‘I really enjoyed the day, it went fast, and it made me want to become a school teacher’. Another added: ‘Working with children was fun and I saw how children had a talent for making things’. She went on: ‘doing it with the children helped me to learning – we should do more of it’.

Parents were sure that their children had taken a lot in. ‘My daughter talked about the story and was singing the song as we came home – it’s not just for one time but for more than one time’, said one mother. They spoke of how children still talk about the spiders and ask if it’s time to play the games again. They also liked the Anansi theme: ‘I didn’t know the story before but it was a good one for children’.

They spoke positively of the specific means used by the artists to stimulate the children’s imaginative work. ‘It was good using the animal figures because it got them going – they need to do more of that so that the children won’t be scared and get used to it’. They refer specifically to the techniques of finger painting and the making of spiders, hats and flowers, and mention the ‘take home’ pack that accompanied the project. ‘There was everything in it, I’ve been using it with my daughter in year two and making spiders with her.’ Another said: ‘It was very colourful and I was pleased to learn about using textiles’.

Parents also valued the cross-curricular nature of the project and the way it combined serious learning with enjoyable activity. This is especially valuable because parents with



little direct experience of English education sometimes assume anxiously that the sole way to help their children learn is to ply them with formal exercises. One mother said: The ‘children were also learning about numbers and colour and alphabet and printing. I can see my daughter can remember how to do it’. Another reflected: ‘You can use what children enjoy and get up to, and how they learn it is fun – they learn at the same time as they enjoy themselves’.

They endorsed the fundamental idea of the project and the way it was carried out. ‘The artists were very good at explaining and they made sure you all get involved’. This was appreciated: ‘They made me happy to work together, and I saw in her face all the time to be happy’. Working with other mothers and fathers was seen as good in itself: ‘I also liked to have time to be with other parents and to work with them and children all together’. Another similar project would be very welcome: ‘I want more days for children to spend like this, once a term, and I am so happy to help if we can do it’.

Children retain positive memories of what they did, for example, ‘I like my mum helping me’ or ‘my dad liked helping in the class.’ Other evaluations touch on different grounds, ‘I learned how to make a hat – it’s good because it fits me’. Or, ‘we did it with a roll like you paint your wall, like my dad does with a roller’. Or again, ‘when you do spider dancing you have to move like this [shows arm and leg motion]’. ‘We only got four arms and legs and spiders have got eight so you need more’. They also liked the idea of continuing the project at home with the ‘fun pack’. ‘We had a bag to take home to make spiders with glue and glitter and pencils and spider legs’ [another child says: ‘pipe cleaners’].

The children and their families were at the centre of the project. Significantly, the children were excited by the project and parents realised that they could make valuable contributions to helping their children creatively. The day with each class passed all too quickly. As one mother said: ‘One day was not so good, maybe one more day will be good, but we did a lot all the time. Children are young and need much time to learn’. This project will be completed as it fulfils itself in the future in many different homes.

Tom Deveson



Number of pupils involved	285
Number of sessions	14
Number of teachers and support staff involved	14
Year groups	nursery and reception
Number of parents involved	40
Creative Partner	Discover

Creative partner

Discover is a hands-on interactive Story Trail in Stratford, east London where young minds can play, explore, make up new characters and create their own special tales. Discover is about story-building – making stories together.

www.discover.org.uk

Writer

Tom Deveson was a full-time teacher in inner London schools for 30 years. He now gives in-service training courses for teachers, runs drama and music projects for children, and writes on literature, the arts and education for a variety of national newspapers and magazines. He also enjoys being a grandparent.

Creative Partnerships

Creative Partnerships is a programme managed by Arts Council England, the national development agency for the arts in England. It gives young people in 36 disadvantaged areas across England the opportunity to develop their creativity and their ambition by building partnerships between schools and creative organisations, businesses and individuals. Creative Partnerships aims to demonstrate the pivotal role creativity and creative people can play in transforming education in every curriculum subject for children of all ages and abilities.

London East and London South were established as two of the first sixteen Creative Partnerships areas in 2002, delivering programmes with schools in Hackney, Islington, Newham and Tower Hamlets and Greenwich, Lambeth, Lewisham and Southwark over a four year period.

In April 2006 the two areas merged to form one Creative Partnerships area delivering a joint creative programme in eight boroughs. Creative Partnerships London East and South is now based at Discover in Stratford.

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This case study is available to download on the Creative Partnerships website. To view this, and to view the other case studies in this series please visit **www.creative-partnerships.com** and go to the **London East and South homepage**.

Photos: Dee Conway

Design: Thirdperson www.thirdperson.co.uk

ISBN: 0-7287-1287-3
978-0-7287-1287-4