

INSPIRING EARLY YEARS

Supporting early years development
through cultural events in libraries



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Contents

Summary	3
Introduction	7
– What the programme set out to achieve	7
– Key players	9
– Funding	9
– Communities of practice	9
– Children's development	10
– Early learning	11
Case Studies	12
– Adventures in Music	12
– Little Creatives	15
– Story Explorers	18
Children's Learning	21
– Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)	22
How the programme supported learning	24
– Young children's learning	24
– Professional learning	28
– Organisational learning	28
Impact of the programme	29
– Reach to families of children under five years of age	29
– What the programme achieved	30
Barriers and lessons learned	31
– Barriers	31
– Lessons learned	31
Key Findings	32
Legacy of the programme	33
Conclusion	34
Recommendations	36
Appendix 1	
Appendix 2	
References	

INSPIRING EARLY YEARS



Summary

Inspire: Culture, Learning and Libraries was created to deliver cultural, library and learning services in Nottinghamshire. Inspire received National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) funding from Arts Council England from 2018 – 2023 to develop and deliver an innovative range of high-quality arts and cultural activities and performances for children and young people. This included developing a cultural programme for children under five and their parents/carers.

These were: Adventures in Music, focused on music and movement, Little Creatives, a visual arts strand, and Story Explorers, using a story and drama approach.

The programme was carried out in selected libraries and in some nursery settings, although during the period of the Covid pandemic, this was unfeasible, and the sessions during this period were recorded and shared online.

What the programme set out to achieve

The programme was intended to broaden access to cultural experiences and provide exciting learning opportunities appealing to children under five and their parents/carers. At the same time the programme aimed to expand the knowledge of artists, creatives and practitioners working in libraries, schools and nurseries. In this process, even the youngest children, contributed to and created "communities of practice"¹ – groups of learners at different stages, learning from each other.



Children's development

It is widely recognised that the first 1000 days² of young children's lives have the greatest impact on their future development: "The first 1000 days of life, from conception to age 2, is a critical phase during which the foundations of a child's development are laid. If a child's body and brain develop well then, their life chances are improved" (House of Commons, 2019).

By the time they are born babies' brains are wired and ready to make the massive leap from helpless new-born infant to a lively, active, communicating toddler. The speed of change and the impact of experience is very profound and connections form at twice the speed of those in adults' brains.³ As the brain grows (from roughly 25% of its full capacity at birth), to 80% during the first three years, it is important to capitalise on this significant 'window of opportunity' when the brain is primed to learn. Yet, amazingly, although this early period may be the optimum time for learning, the brain continues to develop over the life span and learning can still occur into late adulthood. It is also known that young children's healthy social and emotional development, relies heavily on the interactions they have with familiar others such as parents/carers, members of their extended families and people they meet in the wider community such as staff in nurseries, libraries, and schools.

¹ Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991) *Situated Learning: legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge University Press.

² House of Commons (2019) *First 1000 days of life*. House of Commons Health and Social Care Committee. Available at: First 1000 days of life (parliament.uk) (Accessed on: 01 August 2023).

³ Stiles, J., Jernigan, T.L. (2010) *The Basics of Brain Development*. *Neuropsychology Review* 20, 327–348 cited in Finnegan, J. (2016) *Lighting Up Young Brains*. Save the Children.

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Child's brain development⁴



x 2

In the first year, a child's brain doubles in size

80%

By 3 years old, a child's brain will reach 80% of its adult size

1mil

During the first 3 years, a child's brain develops 1 million connections per second

Early Years Foundation Stage

The Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)⁵ is set out in seven areas of learning. Particularly important are the Prime Areas, described as "a foundation for igniting children's curiosity and enthusiasm for learning, forming relationships and thriving" (DfE, 2021a). These are:

Communication and Language
(C&L)

Physical development
(PD)

Personal Social and Emotional Development
(PSED)

These areas are strengthened and applied through four Specific Areas:

Literacy
(Li)

Mathematics
(Ma)

Understanding the World
(UW)

Expressive Arts and Design
(EAD)

⁴Stiles, J., Jernigan, T.L. (2010) *The Basics of Brain Development*. *Neuropsychology Review* 20, 327–348 cited in Finnegan, J. (2016) *Lighting Up Young Brains*. Save the Children.

⁵Department for Education (DfE) (2021a) *Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework*. Available at: [Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk) (Accessed: 1 August 2023).

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Professional and organisational learning

It was notable that as they learned about their young 'customers' professionals were engaged in their own learning with one writing: '*I realised just how much we had to learn as our early years knowledge was minimal.*' Whilst another was struck by how much her thinking had been expanded about '*expectations of what can be achieved.*' Similarly, as they worked together organisations and individuals had to clarify and share understandings of what was needed, what was possible and what each was required to do. As a result, informal sharing occurred at the same time as more formal arrangements were put in place.

Impact of the programme

The number of sessions which took place was 1,562 over 5 years reaching over 20,000 people in Nottinghamshire.

**1,562 sessions over 5 years
>20k people reached**



Key findings

- Each strand of the programme developed its own nature and authenticity.
- Exploration of the learning achieved through the Inspire programme shows clearly how it contributed to many of the overall learning intentions in the EYFS.
- Leaders promoted the importance of the creative process and its primacy over the final product.
- All professionals engaged in some CPD focused on understanding young children's learning and their own practice developed because of participating in a community of practice.
- Periods of mentoring and reflection supported professionals to understand the learning process that participants were engaged in.
- Feedback was received from parents about their own and their children's experiences of sessions and these findings informed future planning.
- Parents learned new skills and reported that their children had grown in confidence after attending sessions and that their children were enthused at the prospect of attending future sessions.

"Loved the musical start and high quality and inspiring workshop, great resources and format."

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Covid response

- Face-to-face sessions were temporarily discontinued/disrupted as a consequence of the Covid pandemic and attendance at live events reduced.
- During the Covid period, online sessions were produced, and these continue to be available online.
- Following the Covid crisis, take up rose and sessions booked up again.



Legacy

- A Little Creatives exhibition, toured to five Inspire Library Galleries in 2023.
- A Little Creatives book, containing twenty-five activities for parents and children to complete at home, has been published and can be obtained from Nottinghamshire libraries. Additionally, YouTube™ features a series of sessions from this strand of the programme.
- A cache of ten Adventures in Music videos can be accessed at any time by individuals at home via the Inspire website.
- Two online versions of Story Explorers which can be accessed online.

Recommendations

Suggested areas, that the programme developers might wish to consider as they enter a further round of the programme:

- Explore further the range and gender of participants.
- Explore further patterns of attendance and non-attendance of booked places.
- Explore ways of further widening participation.
- Clarify further what children are learning in sessions.



INSPIRING EARLY YEARS



Introduction

Inspire: Culture, Learning and Libraries was created to deliver cultural, library and learning services in Nottinghamshire. Inspire received National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) funding from Arts Council England from 2018 – 2023 to develop and deliver an innovative range of high-quality arts and cultural activities and performances for children and young people.

This included developing a cultural programme for children under five and their parents/carers.

These were:

Adventures in Music:
Music and movement

Little Creatives:
Visual arts

Story Explorers:
Story and drama

The programme, offering a series of face-to face sessions, ran for five years, in selected libraries and some nursery settings. However, during the period of the Covid pandemic this was not feasible, and the ensuing sessions were recorded and shared online.

The programme took place in twelve large libraries across Nottinghamshire and, due to additional funding, one part of the programme was able to be taken to several smaller libraries and community groups.⁶ Sessions of **Little Creatives** were delivered in four-week blocks in libraries and in early years settings⁷ after an action research approach which led to refinements to the final offering, whilst **Adventures in Music** sessions were delivered in ten-week blocks across the year.

The **Story Explorers** strand, took place, at intervals, three times a year in each of the twelve participating libraries, the programme was refined as it developed and it was built on previous work by Nottingham Playhouse. Attendance at all sessions was monitored closely to observe and predict patterns of take up and of non attendance and to inform planning.

What the programme set out to achieve

Broadly, the programme was designed to engage children under five and their parents/carers with an enhanced offer beyond the regular rhyme and story sessions in libraries, which already attracted thousands of children annually. Inspire's aim of its NPO funded programme was to broaden access to cultural experiences and the enhanced offer was intended to extend learning opportunities to the youngest children – aged 4 years or under and their parents/carers, as well as artists, creatives and practitioners working in libraries, schools and nurseries. The programme aimed to achieve multiple learning objectives in relation to all participants, creating "communities of practice" – groups of learners who learn alongside each other (Lave, J., & Wenger, E., 1991).

■ "Lovely music session - inspiring for children."



⁶ Appendix 1

⁷ Appendix 2

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In developing the three strands of the programme, the team were clear that each strand should appeal to the youngest children and should build on an already strong foundation, into a broader, cultural programme that would support children's learning in new and memorable ways. The different strands of arts activity, which together would involve children in making, creating, listening, talking, moving, crawling, playing, exploring and observing, amongst many other things, were:

Strand 1: Adventures in Music: Music and movement

The **Adventures in Music** strand aspired to use rhythm, rhymes, music, and movement to stimulate creativity and imagination and to develop language and literacy skills with sessions intended to build on learning and support children to gain confidence in exploring and making music.

Strand 2: Little Creatives: Visual arts

The **Little Creatives** strand focused on enabling artists to work creatively to help young children learn new skills and to develop their language and literacy skills whilst having fun. Integral to this approach was a focus on supporting artists' development, creating a lasting product, and sharing learning with the sector.⁸ Initially to be shared as a series of activity cards it evolved to become a Little Creatives book for families to borrow from the libraries; this contains twenty-five creative activities to carry out at home.

Strand 3: Story Explorers: Story and drama

The **Story Explorers** strand was designed to offer memorable experiences to children along with opportunities for interaction and for communication and language development, movement, and sensory and pretend play. The interactive story sessions, created in partnership with Nottingham Playhouse, evolved over time and was a series of original stories enacted in imaginative and interesting ways that fired the imagination both of children and parents.



⁸ Sector-defined as all participants in the process as well as those beyond the organisation such as other libraries, settings and so on.



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Key players

The processes of developing the programme involved a significant learning journey for Inspire.

Practitioners
in libraries
and nurseries

Artists,
musicians and
creatives

Participants –
young children
and their
parents

Funding

Funding for this ambitious programme derived from a successful bid to Arts Council England, when Inspire became a National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) in 2018, the organisation was awarded a four-year grant to develop a range of innovative cultural programmes for children and young people, including work for children aged under 5. Four years later, in 2022, it was awarded additional NPO funding for a further year to consolidate and share this work. Additional funding was also received from the Miner2Major Landscape Partnership Scheme, allowing the inclusion of additional, smaller libraries to receive the early years programmes.

Communities of practice

Working together led to the creation of what can be described as '*informal*' "*communities of practice*" – that people form as they pursue shared enterprises over time.⁹ and in which learning is seen as a process of social participation. The ethos of groups formed in this way allows learners to observe skilled others over time – developing skills and strategies gleaned from involvement and from varying levels of participation which increase as they themselves become more expert at a particular practice – such as moving in time to music and internalising a beat. However, as an outcome of this transformation – that is, from being a newcomer to becoming skilled, it is widely recognised that there are benefits to both the 'teacher' and the 'learner', since the interactional process can create 'co-learners' who may learn different things from the same experience. Indeed, as became evident through the course of the programme, and will be discussed further in this report, learning occurred at all levels and all participants, regardless of their roles, learned from engagement in this creative programme.

"A wonderful sensory experience, perfectly age appropriate."

"Really brilliant thank you. Always impresses and entertains both my three-year-old and myself!"

⁹ Wenger, E. (1998) *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge University Press. Available at: [Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity. \(apa.org\)](https://www.apa.org). (Accessed on: 24 February 2023).



INSPIRING EARLY YEARS



Children's development

It is widely recognised that the *first 1000 days*¹⁰ of young children's lives have the greatest impact on their subsequent development – indeed the House of Commons Select Committee noted: "The first 1000 days of life, from conception to age 2, is a critical phase during which the foundations of a child's development are laid. If a child's body and brain develop well then, their life chances are improved" (House of Commons, 2019).

Similarly, it is accepted that the earliest years, up to five, are of great significance to children's life chances and that a major factor in healthy development is that children need to have a secure attachment or at least one person 'on their side'. And "When children have a secure attachment with their parent/carer, it is an important protective factor for their mental health, while insecure attachments can be a risk factor for the development of emotional and behaviour problems".¹¹

Young children's healthy social and emotional development then, relies heavily on the interactions they have with familiar others such as parents/carers, members of their extended families and people they meet in the wider community such as staff in nurseries, libraries, and schools. Armed with this knowledge it was seen as essential that the role of parents and carers was recognised as integral to supporting participating children as they played and learned during sessions. This view is further supported by research which shows unequivocal evidence that "when parents have the knowledge, skills and confidence to provide the kinds of relationships and experiences that children need in the early years, it makes a real difference to children's futures".¹² Similarly, it was recognised that skilled adults, such as creatives and other artists would need continuing professional development (CPD) to enable them to work effectively with young children. Therefore, CPD was provided so that participating adults would be confident to meet the needs of such young children.

Child's brain development¹³



x 2

In the first year, a child's brain doubles in size

80%

By 3 years old, a child's brain will reach 80% of its adult size

1mil

During the first 3 years, a child's brain develops 1 million connections per second



¹⁰ House of Commons (2019) *First 1000 Days of Life*. House of Commons Health and Social Care Committee. Available at: First 1000 days of life (parliament.uk) (Accessed on: 01 August 2023).

¹¹ Freud, A. (n.d.) *Attachment and child development*. National Centre for Children and Families. Mentally Healthy Schools. Available at: Attachment and child development : Mentally Healthy Schools (Accessed on: 26 February 2023).

¹² Roberts, K. (2009) *Early Home Learning Matters: A Good Practice Guide*. London: Family and Parenting Institute Family and Parenting Institute.

¹³ Stiles, J., Jernigan, T.L. (2010) *The Basics of Brain Development*. *Neuropsychology Review* 20, 327–348 cited in Finnegan, J. (2016) *Lighting Up Young Brains*. Save the Children.

INSPIRING EARLY YEARS



Early learning

Real learning begins well before children attend nurseries, schools or playgroups and all children have already begun learning before birth. By the time they are born babies' brains are wired and ready to make the massive leap from helpless new-born infant to a lively, active communicating toddler. The speed of changes and the impact of experience is very profound and connections form at twice the speed of those in adults' brains (Stiles, J., Jernigan, T.L., 2010, cited in Finnegan, J., 2016). As the brain grows (from roughly 25% of its full capacity at birth), to 80% during the first three years, it is important to capitalise on this significant 'window of opportunity' when the brain is primed to learn. Yet, although this early period may be the optimum time for learning, the remaining 20% of development continues over the life span and learning can still occur into late adulthood.

The experiences that children have influence and expand the capacity of the brain and children are active participants in their own learning – reaching out to grasp things, smiling and attracting people to them, playing and finding out about the properties of objects and beginning to understand language and others' communication. This way of learning is best described as interactive and is distinct from a view of learning as fact-based and derived from being 'told' or taught such facts. Alison Gopnik, Professor of Psychology compares the way young children learn to the scientific process in which "scientists learn mostly the same way children are learning. The way [scientists] have to learn is by being really driven and going out and trying lots of things and doing lots of experiments and having lots of fun doing it. And then we try to make sense of what we find out. And that seems to be the same... literally, the same processes that are involved with children".¹⁴ It is interesting to find that when artists were preparing to develop Little Creatives sessions they reached a similar conclusion, reflecting that there are many similarities between the way young children play and experience new materials and the way artists work.



¹⁴Gopnik, A., & Meltzoff, A. N., (1997) *Words, Thoughts, and Theories*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA. Available at: Science | AAAS (Accessed on: 01 August 2023).



Case Study 1

Adventures in Music

Adventures in Music as its name suggests, focused on fun activities exploring rhythm, music and rhyme to develop children's language and physical skills. The sessions, carried out in three ten-week blocks across the year, took place in twelve libraries. When Covid struck ten sessions were uploaded to Inspire's website to be shared at home by children and their parents/carers, in addition to live sessions delivered over Zoom. Each session was planned around a different theme:

1. Fairies
2. Minibeasts
3. Pirates
4. Jolly Jungle
5. Snowflake City
6. Rainbow Island
7. Savannah
8. Mermaid City
9. Old Mac's Farm
10. Monsters



The programme was designed to assist parent/carer skills in supporting their children at home. The sessions involved music teachers who were more used to teaching older pupils (over 5) and thus were required to adapt to new ways of working. The objective was to find new ways of engaging both pre-school age children, as well as their parents. Teachers were supported with training in child development and most adapted to new ways of working. Initially, plans were put in place to involve library staff in sessions alongside musicians, but this was not possible due to front line library staff vacancies. However, a mentoring programme was designed to increase the skills of Inspire's Instrumental Music Team and to share good practice, thus enabling peer learning within forums.

"Clare has been great – a super mix of songs, instruments and stories. The children love her and have a wonderful time. Confidence has grown over the 10 weeks."



INSPIRING EARLY YEARS



A curriculum was developed which would support children to learn about several features of musicality and a pathway document was created, describing the skills children would acquire as an outcome of the fun-filled, interactive activities each week. Ten skills were identified:

1. I can play fast and slow music.
2. I can play loud and quiet music.
3. I can use my voice to make a sound picture.
4. I can play rhythm sticks to the beat of the music.
5. I can play shakers to the beat of music.
6. I can move my body in time with the music.
7. I can sing counting songs.
8. I can sing and dance a circle song.
9. I can dance with scarves/ribbons to the music.
10. I can do action songs.



In addition to the creation of the *Adventures in Music* pathway document, a companion document was devised to assess children's knowledge and understanding of music. A further resource was a carer support package, created to provide parents/carers with information and resources to repeat and extend activities at home.

Each 45-minute session, catering for a maximum of twelve children per session, began with a greeting time in which basic resources such as egg shakers, sticks, a parachute and scarves were displayed. Each session followed a similar pattern with a listening time, a singing time and a time to play instruments, with activities changing regularly and a good variety of movement incorporated – to maintain children's engagement in activities. Teachers were responsive to children, following their lead, for example when a child asked to use the sticks to beat out a rhythm.



INSPIRING EARLY YEARS



Learning opportunities included:

- Listening to a song or rhyme.
- Joining in with a song or rhyme.
- Learning new vocabulary such as tempo, beat, pitch, rhythm, fast, slow, quiet, loud, stomp, streamer, ribbon, parachute.
- Playing musical instruments or sound makers at a given pace, pitch, beat
- Moving in time to music.
- Joining in dances alongside peers.
- Participating in action songs.
- Anticipating what comes next and waiting before joining in at a particular place in the song.

Let's play
some music



Following an artistic and quality assessment from Arts Council England, specific elements were developed to draw on Eastern European traditions and resources were updated to include songs in different languages.

Online sessions

The ten recorded online sessions followed a similar format to the live sessions in that there was a clear structure to each session. An animated background supported the thematic approach with each session beginning with a transporting song which would take participants from their home to for example, The Land of Dinosaurs or to the moon in the session: In Space. Once in the make-believe land, further animations served to reinforce the musician's words when, for example two dinosaurs appeared or a pirate walked the plank. The sessions progressed over time with the final sessions offering opportunities to reinforce earlier learning by combining several skills for children to refine.

Music teachers also delivered sessions via Zoom, parents were posted a pack of resources including music shakers and scarves to allow them to take part remotely.





INSPIRING EARLY YEARS

Case Study 2

Little Creatives

Little Creatives focused on stimulating creativity whilst encouraging development of fine motor skills for children and providing their parents with the tools to engage them in art activities and reading. In libraries, sessions were presented in blocks of four, so families could choose to attend all four or book individually. Sessions took place in twelve of the county's largest libraries and, eleven Early Years settings. The offer was later extended to include a further six libraries and two community groups.

The project relied on the involvement of artists and artists' development was seen as an important feature of the strand, together with the creation of a library product which eventually became the **Little Creatives** book containing tried and tested creative activities for parents to do at home with their children.

Following a process of recruitment and training, a team of professional artists was identified and worked creatively to help young children unleash their creativity and imagination. Sessions involved playing with and exploring the properties of different materials and finding out about what could be done with different materials – such as paper which can be scrunched, squeezed, squashed and torn, and clay which can be stretched, rolled, cut into pieces, pummelled and moulded.

“My two girls absolutely loved this, my youngest who is 2 was really engaged and joined in.”

“Thank you! A lovely free experience. We both really enjoyed it. My daughter was sad when it was over!”





INSPIRING EARLY YEARS

Artists, skilled in areas such as printmaking, mixed media, drawing and painting collaborated to devise sessions which would meet the brief. Eventually, following reflection and evaluation each artist developed a minimum of five workshops and although each artist worked in a different art form each workshop shared common threads. Again, sessions lasted in the region of 45 minutes and followed the pattern described:

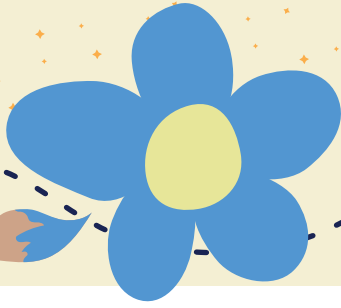
- **Children and families were warmly welcomed.**
- **The sessions often took place on the floor both to allow for children to lie down as well as to avoid the use of furniture of an unsuitable height.**
- **Materials were revealed gradually – to allow children to appreciate them at their own pace.**
- **Sessions were child-led, in as much as though artists had a broad plan, they were willing to change if children's explorations led them on diverging paths.**
- **Parents participated but were led by their children's responses.**
- **Children were encouraged to make choices and reach decisions as part of the process.**

Each session was based on an open-ended activity – these included:

- Making little creatures from recyclables such as newspaper, straws, paper plates and tape.
- Terracotta clay exploration – using lumps of clay to make marks or paint with when wet, shaping, smearing, rolling, cutting and flattening clay.
- Painting and mark-making with materials such as wax candles and crayons.
- Creating islands from tree slices and playdough, then adding foliage and found objects to make the island even more enchanting.
- Frottage – the practice of covering 2D objects with paper then softly rubbing with graphite, coal or other materials to reveal the outline of the hidden object.
- Collage – in which materials were combined and the resulting images printed.
- Printmaking – using foam and blocks to cover an object such as a cube which could then be printed with.
- Making birds and caterpillars from a mix of materials such as playdough, wood discs, string and lids.



INSPIRING EARLY YEARS



The use of found and natural materials introduced in the **Little Creatives** strand of the programme provided many opportunities for sensory experiences as children found out the properties of different materials and what they could do with them. Learning opportunities included:

- Exploring clay, wood and comparing their properties: for example, all are hard, yet clay is malleable and can easily change shape, whilst wood, though not malleable, can be changed by cutting or whittling it.
- Using vocabulary associated with different media – including descriptions of processes involved in combining coloured sheets for a kaleidoscope activity, or mixing inks to discover new colours.
- Developing manipulative skills through handling a range of materials and learning that some materials are fragile – such as a leaf, whilst others are more robust – such as a piece of clay.
- Cooperating, collaborating and playing alongside other children and sharing materials, recognising when something is 'fair' or 'not fair'.
- Experiencing moments of awe and wonder as exemplified by the response of children when a box full of brightly coloured ribbons and tapes was revealed on opening.
- Making decisions and choices about the suitability of different materials for different purposes – for example recognising that nest boxes would have to be made of more robust materials than the birds themselves.
- Exploring a range of media and materials and using their imagination to create something new from these.
- Using a range of senses to feel, hear, see and smell natural materials such as lavender and rosemary.
- Enjoying storytelling and imaginative skills as children's creations were brought to life in their free play.





Case Study 3

Story Explorers

Nottingham Playhouse was commissioned to create interactive story sessions for children and their families. The sessions were carried out three times each year, in twelve libraries, with the aim to create an immersive, interactive and memorable library (and theatrical) experience for Inspire Libraries' youngest customers.

The resulting Story Explorers sessions consisted of

- an original story and theatrical backdrop centred on the adventurous exploration of Little Owl.
- A theatrical backdrop transforming library spaces first into Granny & Little Owl's house before unfolding into the habitats Little Owl (and the audience) explored. These included going under the sea, to polar lands, the forest, space, the desert and more.
- Imaginative costumes, props and puppets to support and enhance the story, together with excellent performance storytelling delivered by theatrical practitioners.

Story Explorers took its inspiration from the natural environment, habitats, climates and animals. It provided a creative open learning process, which was child-led, involving active learning through puppetry and original storytelling. The aim of this approach was to take participants on an adventure – a journey to a new environment, where the children, parents and carers could explore and learn together. Each environment offered different play opportunities with sensory resources designed to allow specific schema play interests to be investigated.

"Fabulous performance for the children. Kept their attention wonderfully. Very gifted actresses."



INSPIRING EARLY YEARS

During sessions families were invited into the library space and performers welcomed them by singing a 'hello' song and introducing props or puppets that would appear in the story. Each session was based on a theme – these included:

1 Under the Sea

A deep dive under the sea introducing a world beneath the waves where Little Owl met new and interesting companions.

2 Polar Adventures

An exploration of snowy lands in the polar region inhabited by seals, penguins, and arctic foxes.

3 Fantastical Forests

An adventure deep in the forest where woodland creatures such as rabbits, hedgehogs, and other wildlife were found.

4 Dramatic Deserts

Where children were able to meet a talking cactus and a comical camel as they journeyed together from place to place in the sands of the desert.



5 Up, Up and Away

A thrilling rocket ride to the moon filled with starry surprises and magical music led children to explore the outer limits of the solar system.

6 Into The Jungle

Containing a surprise for Little Owl as he ventured into the jungle, meeting sloths, parrots and monkeys.

7 Little Owl Goes to Town

A mission in which Little Owl is intent on buying Granny Owl a present for her birthday which only becomes possible with the help of friends such as Rat and Pigeon as he negotiates a world so different from his own.

8 Down, Down Underground

Where Little Owl discovers that there is a whole world beneath the world he inhabits – and goes underground to find out all about the sounds and drama of life underground.



INSPIRING EARLY YEARS



In order to facilitate a high level of interactivity each session involved the use of props and other resources including the backdrop to Granny Owl's house. For example, the Fantastical Forests adventure involved the following elements:

- All children were given a 'collecting bag' as they entered the space.
- Sessions began with interactive sensory play exploring props including pine cones, flowers, and apples. Each child stored one of each item in their collecting bag as the story began.
- Little Owl's adventures took him to the forest where he met a ranger who was busy looking after the forest.
- On his travels, Little Owl met various creatures of the forest including squirrels, hedgehogs and bees – each creature needed the children to find an item from their collecting bag and return it to the story.
- A mischievous frog who was littering the forest was helped, by the other animals (and our audience) to understand how to care for the forest.

“We have been transported to the Arabian desert and been totally immersed in the story. Thank you for the exciting adventure!”

The use of props and the various habitats introduced in the **Story Explorers** strand of the programme provided excellent opportunities for engaging and involving children in Little Owl's dramatic adventures. By introducing these habitats and creating adventures featuring Little Owl, children were given a wide range of experiences which contributed to their learning and development.

These included:

- Listening, understanding and waiting skills – learning when to join in and when to listen.
- Self-regulation skills – waiting to be invited to return an item to the story rather than doing this randomly. Turn-taking as they waited to meet a puppet, smell a sensory object or receive their item.
- Anticipating events such as whether Little Owl would fall out of the boat in Under the Sea.
- Learning new vocabulary.
- Learning to listen to correct pronunciation and grammatically correct language.
- Recognising that stories/drama can be situated in different places.
- Learning about different characters and their roles in stories/drama.
- Learning about beginnings and endings and events which move the story/drama forward.
- Experiencing fear or uncertainty in a safe environment and the relief when worrying issues are resolved, for example when Little Owl succeeds in returning the shell to its rightful place.



Children's Learning

Young children learn in a variety of ways – many of which are common to adults – for example, children learn through:

Play and exploration

Modelling by adults

Guided learning

Direct teaching

By observing others

Imitating others

Trial and error

Practice and repetition

Listening to and talking with others

New and challenging experiences

Sharing books

Pretending and making up scenarios

Play is often described as a child's work because it involves the child fully and requires effort – imagine, for example, when a child pretends to be the parent with a crying baby to take care of. This requires the child to explore what it would be like to be an adult and to call on their experience of being the child to decide what actions they (as the parent) should take – should they pick up the baby and comfort it or should they wait for the baby to go to sleep?

So, play both creates dilemmas for young children but also engages them in using their thinking skills to come to a decision about what to do next. Similarly, when young children share resources, space and adults they learn to make judgements about when they may use a resource, fill a space, or obtain an adult's full attention because, as they play, they are learning, working out the rules and finding out which apply to them.

"My daughter and I enjoyed adventures in music. My daughter loves to join in with the songs and actions. Paul is great with the children and makes the session really engaging."



INSPIRING EARLY YEARS

Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)

In the EYFS¹⁵ learning is set out in seven discrete areas, which together support children's development. The areas of learning considered to be particularly important are the Prime Areas which are described as "a foundation for igniting children's curiosity and enthusiasm for learning, forming relationships and thriving" (DfE, 2021a).

These are:

Communication
and Language
(C&L)

Physical
Development
(PD)

Personal, Social
and Emotional
Development
(PSED)

Communication and language (C&L)

Communication is the bedrock of relationships since it is through their attempts at communication that young children begin to develop relationships – for example, when they smile at a person looking at them in a supermarket queue. Other forms of early communication such as waving their arms and legs when excited or pointing to things show us that young children have something to say though their communication is not verbal initially, yet their non-verbal signs tell us they want to make their voices heard.

When adults engage in interaction, described in the literature as "serve and return"¹⁶ with young children – noticing the child's focus, then supporting and encouraging them and helping them to name something such as the owl in the story, the interaction becomes like a volley in a tennis match, rewarding and reinforcing the child's efforts at communication. It is salutary to note that "Children with poor verbal skills at 3 are likely to do poorly in language and literacy when they enter school".¹⁷

Physical development (PD)

In order to become confident tool users young children need opportunities both to develop their gross and fine motor skills. Opportunities for making prints, bending straws, scrunching paper, fixing things, squeezing and stretching clay and making marks develop children's fine motor skills, whilst having opportunities to lie on the floor, stretch, reach out and use their whole bodies in the creative process supports children's gross motor skills. The use of tools such as scissors, paint brushes and glue spreaders also support aspects of fine motor development as does the use of musical instruments, which children can bang, scrape and shake. It is notable that the precision required to develop fine motor control also supports hand-eye coordination, which is later linked to early literacy, specifically writing. Gaining skills in tool use allows children to develop self-confidence as well as control and proficiency in mark-making.

¹⁵ Department for Education (DfE) (2021a) Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework. Available at: Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage (publishing.service.gov.uk) (Accessed on: 1 August 2023).

¹⁶ Centre on the Developing Child (2008) *5 Steps for Brain-Building Serve and Return*. Harvard University. Available at: 5 Steps for Brain-Building Serve and Return - Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (Accessed on: 1 August 2023).

¹⁷ McCain, M. N., Fraser Mustard, J. & McCuaig, K. (2011) *Early Years Study 3: Making Decisions Taking Action* (MWMFF).

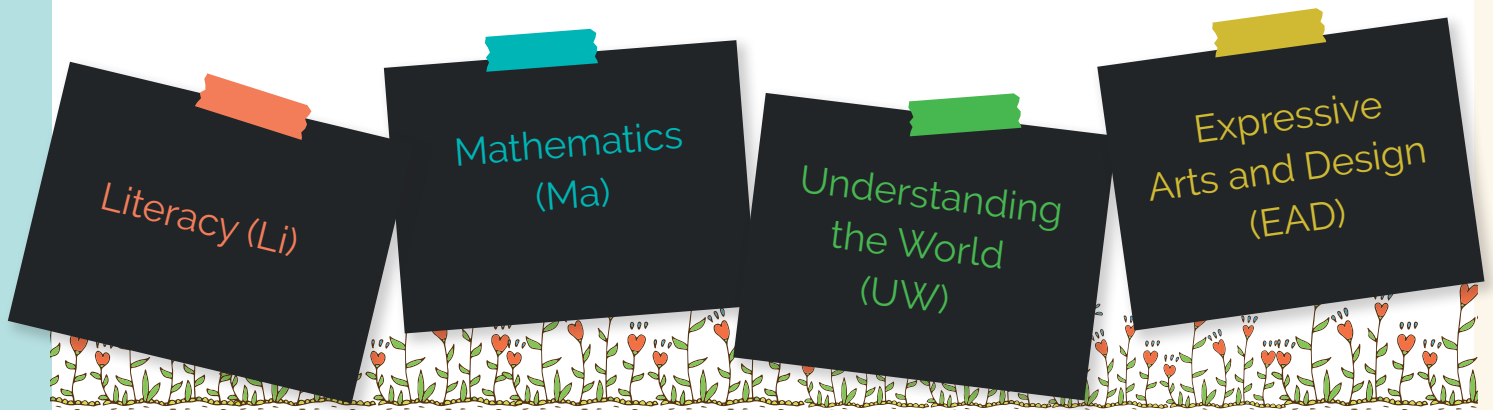
INSPIRING EARLY YEARS



Personal, social and emotional development (PSED)

PSED enables children to move from dependence to independence through warm, healthy relationships with adults and their peers. Through developing social and emotional skills children learn to manage their emotions and understand the impact of their own actions on those around them. At the same time, they learn to accept and follow rules and to carry on trying when faced with challenges. A significant part of personal development is being aware of their own needs such as for food and rest and bodily care. Over time, with support from adults, children learn to cooperate with others and to resolve conflict.

The areas of learning are strengthened and applied through four specific areas:



These seven areas are set out in the Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), a key document relating to the care and education of children from birth to five. The document stresses the importance of children's spoken language (C&L), arguing that this underpins all other areas, emphasising at the same time that children's personal, social and emotional development (PSED) is crucial to them leading healthy and happy lives. The EYFS also states that in planning and guiding what children learn practitioners should be aware of three characteristics of effective teaching and learning which are:

- **Playing and exploring (P&E)** – through which children investigate and 'have a go' at things.
- **Active learning (AL)** – in which children concentrate and keep on trying even when effort is required.
- **Creating and thinking critically (C&TC)** – which allows children to have their own ideas and make links in their learning.

Research indicates that without healthy development, cognitive development can be compromised.



INSPIRING EARLY YEARS



How the programme supported learning

Young children's learning

Each strand of the Inspire programme can be seen to contribute to the overall learning intentions in the statutory EYFS and the following tables illustrate where these links can be seen.

Where reference is made to the Early Learning Goals (ELGs) it should be noted these goals are reached by children at the end of the EYFS, that is, when a child is at the end of the reception year in school, and that the experiences referred to in the programme merely contribute to this end point, and there is no suggestion that the ELGs are achieved as a result of participation in the programme.

In the following section reference is made to a companion document to the EYFS, the non-statutory, Development Matters¹⁸ and occasional reference is made to the Ofsted Framework.¹⁹

Links between learning in the EYFS and Adventures in Music

Listening to a song or rhyme

Listen to simple stories and understand what is happening, with the help of pictures (C&L) (DfE, 2021b, p.28).

Listen attentively and respond to what they hear (C&L) (DfE, 2021a, p.11).

Joining in with a song or rhyme

Know many rhymes (C&L) (DfE, 2021b, p.32).

Participate in small group... and one-to-one discussions, offering their own ideas and recently introduced vocabulary (C&L) (DfE, 2021a, p.11).

Learning new vocabulary such as tempo, beat, pitch, rhythm, fast, slow, quiet, loud, stomp, streamer, ribbon, parachute

Use a wider range of vocabulary (C&L) (DfE, 2021b, p.31).

Children develop their vocabulary and understanding (Ofsted, 2021, para. 188).

Explore a range of sound makers and instruments and play them in different ways (EAD) (DfE, 2021b, p.116).

Playing musical instruments or sound makers at a given pace, pitch, beat

Perform songs, rhymes, poems and stories with others – and when appropriate – try to move in time with music (EAD) (DfE, 2021a, p.15).

Moving in time to music

Move and dance to music (EAD) (DfE, 2021b, p.116).

When appropriate – try to move in time with music (EAD) (DfE, 2021a, p.15).

¹⁸ DfE (2021b) *Development Matters*. Available at: Development Matters - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk) (Accessed on: 01 August 2023).

¹⁹ Ofsted (2021) *Early Years Inspection Handbook*. For Ofsted Registered Provision. Available at: *Early years inspection handbook* - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk) (Accessed on: 01 August 2023).



INSPIRING EARLY YEARS



Links between learning in the EYFS and Adventures in Music

Joining in dances alongside peers

When appropriate – try to move in time with music (EAD) (DfE, 2021a, p.15).

Participating in action songs

Enjoy songs and rhymes, tuning in and paying attention (C&L) (DfE, 2021b, p.76).

Sing a range of well-known nursery rhymes and songs (EAD) (DfE, 2021a, p.15).

Anticipating what comes next and waiting before joining in at a particular place in the song

Begin to show effortful control (PSED) (DfE, 2021b, p.47).

Give focused attention to what the teacher says, responding appropriately when engaged in an activity, and show an ability to follow instructions (PSED) (DfE, 2021a, p.12).

Links between learning in the EYFS and Little Creatives

Exploring clay, sticks, wood and comparing their properties

Explore materials with different properties (UW) (DfE, 2021b, p.100).

Explore the natural world around them (UW) (DfE, 2021a, p.14).

Use all their senses in hands-on exploration of natural materials (UW) (DfE, 2021b, p.104).

Vocabulary associated with different media

Talk about what they see using a wide vocabulary (UW) (DfE, 2021b, p.104).

Listen attentively to what they see and hear (C&L) (DfE, 2021a, p.11)

Developing manipulative skills through handling a range of materials

Use gross and fine motor skills to do things independently (PD) (DfE, 2021b, p.64).

Develop manipulation and control; explore different materials and tools (PD) (DfE, 2021b, p.64).

Use a range of tools, including scissors, paint brushes and cutlery (PD) (DfE, 2021a, p.13).

Cooperating, collaborating and playing alongside other children and sharing materials

Through supported interaction with other children they learn how to make good friendships and cooperate; (DfE, 2021a, p.9).

Be confident to try new activities (PSED) (DfE, 2021a, p.12).

Experiencing moments of awe and wonder

Help children experience the awe and wonder of the world in which they live (Ofsted, 2021, para.184).



INSPIRING EARLY YEARS



Links between learning in the EYFS and Little Creatives

Making decisions and choices about the suitability of different materials for different purposes

Explore a variety of materials, tools and techniques, experimenting with colour, design, text, form and function (EAD) (DfE, 2021a, p.15).

Exploring a range of media and materials and using their imagination to create something new from these

Explore a variety of materials, tools and techniques, experimenting with colour, design, text, form and function (ibid).

Using a range of senses to feel, hear, see and smell natural materials

Children investigate and experience things (P&E) (DfE, 2021a, p.16).

Storytelling and imaginative skills

Make use of props and materials when role playing characters in narratives and stories (EAD) (DfE, 2021a, p.15).

Links between learning in the EYFS and Story Explorers



Listening, understanding and waiting skills – learning when to join in and when to listen

Paying attention to more than one thing at a time which can be difficult (C&L) (DfE, 2021b, p.30).

Give focused attention to what the teacher says, responding appropriately when engaged in an activity, and show an ability to follow instructions (PSED) (DfE, 2021a, p.12).

Self-regulation skills - waiting to be invited to return an item to the story rather than doing this randomly. Turn-taking as they waited to meet a puppet, smell a sensory object or receive their item

Show an ability to follow instructions (PSED) (DfE, 2021a, p.12).

Increasingly following rules, understanding why they are important (PSED) (DfE, 2021b, p.52).



INSPIRING EARLY YEARS

Links between learning in the EYFS and Story Explorers

Anticipating events in a story

Anticipate, where appropriate, key events in stories (Li) (DfE, 2021a, p.13).

Learning new vocabulary

Use a wider range of vocabulary (C&L) (DfE, 2021b, p.31).
Understands single words in context (C&L) (DfE, 2021b, p.25).
Children develop their vocabulary and understanding (Ofsted, 2021, para.188).

Learning to listen to correct pronunciation and grammatically correct language

Practitioners ensure that their own speaking, listening and reading of English enables children to hear and develop their own language and vocabulary well (Ofsted, 2021, para.188).

Recognising that stories/ drama can be situated in different places

Enjoy listening to longer stories and can remember much of what happens (C&L) (DfE, 2021b, p.30).

Learning about different characters and their roles in stories/drama

Demonstrate understanding of what has been read to them by retelling stories and narratives using their own words and recently introduced vocabulary (Li) (DfE, 2021a, p.13).

Learning about beginnings and endings and events which move the story/ drama forward

Experiencing fear or uncertainty in a safe environment and the relief when worrying issues are resolved, for example when Little Owl succeeds in braving the jungle

Show an understanding of their own feelings... and begin to regulate their behaviour accordingly (PSED) (DfE, 2021a, p.13).



INSPIRING EARLY YEARS



Professional learning

It was intended that the programme should inspire and engage young children and that they would learn through play and exploration as they encountered new materials, new ideas and new ways of being. Feedback from parents/carers supports this and it is notable that professionals, as they learned about their young 'customers', endeavoured to ensure that they acted as enablers and facilitators to children's learning processes.

After the first session of CPD with an early years specialist one professional wrote: *'I realised just how much we had to learn as our early years knowledge was minimal.'* Whilst another was struck by how much her thinking had been expanded about *'expectations of what can be achieved'*.

A common misconception – that "the adult's role is simply to 'teach' children, making every moment a teaching moment"²⁰ is challenged by research which explains that the adult's role is to encourage and increase children's engagement in learning, reminding us that the most important ingredient in teaching and learning is 'how' activities happen and how the child feels in the interactional process, rather than that the child achieves a specific end-product as an outcome.

The latter was central to professionals' minds as they honed their skills and yielded to children's individual explorations. For example, the artist leading a final Little Creative's session commented that a participant, Child A *'Liked to stretch ideas, and added a cobweb with coloured pens to the floorcloth, for instance.'* Whilst two other children *'ended up painting their arms all the way up to the elbows in colourful compositions'*.

Organisational learning

Organisations develop ways of operating which are both effective and efficient but internal practices are often challenged when collaboration with outside agencies is required, as occurred when alliances were formed with different organisations such as Nottingham Playhouse, the Music Hub, libraries and early years settings, as well as artists and creatives, all with their own working practices.

The outcome of these collaborations was that it was important for organisations and individuals to clarify and share understandings of what was needed, what was possible and what each was required to do. Informal sharing occurred at the same time as more formal arrangements were put in place. However, it necessitated that this formality should neither inhibit nor constrain the creative possibilities and the commissioning organisation was careful not to be prescriptive so that partners could use their expertise and experience to develop a suitable approach that would achieve the programme's overall aims.



²⁰ Galinsky, E. & Gavin, M. (2010) *Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs*. Harper Collins Publishers.

INSPIRING EARLY YEARS

Impact of the programme

The impact of the programme is best considered in terms of reach to families with young children as well as in relation to what it achieved in terms of its stated aims, to introduce early years children to new experiences, support their learning and language skills and to create memorable, fun experiences in libraries.

Reach to families of children under five years of age

Projections for attendance at the different strands of the programme varied due to the nature of the sessions, so for example, capacity for Story Explorers was limited to twenty children and their accompanying parent/carer and this strand took place once each season in autumn, spring and summer.

Whilst the remaining strands had a target audience of approximately ten to twelve children per session plus parents/carers per session, this varied significantly in early years settings. An issue that then emerged was that bookings exceeded actual attendance, and in one instance this variation was between 100% and 38%. In order to reduce non-attendance a small charge of £2 was then made for the Story Explorers' strand and this did lower the incidence of non-attendance somewhat, though patterns of attendance continued to be variable. However, young children are sometimes subject to minor illnesses such as colds and coughs and parents rightly choose to keep them at home to recover and it is possible that this may have led to a higher-than-expected rate of absenteeism.

Adventures in Music

1047 in person sessions
8376 children
8300 adults

10 online recorded sessions
80 live zoom sessions

Little Creatives

292 in person sessions
1347 children
905 adults

10 online recorded sessions
55,000 visitors had the chance to see the exhibition
Little Creatives book issued from Inspire Libraries

Story Explorers

121 in person sessions
1,449 children

1,359 adults
2 online stories



INSPIRING EARLY YEARS

What the programme achieved

Changed perception of libraries The programme proved to be exceptionally popular with families because of its uniqueness – with many enjoying the novelty of the different strands and commenting that they had “*not been to anything like this before*”.

Captivated audiences Many parents reported that their children enjoyed sessions and one parent fed back that she had never seen her “*22 month old so engrossed*” as when he attended a Story Explorers’ session. This indicates that, as feedback from parents showed, the sessions were appropriate for the target age group.

Offered follow-up activities Returning Story Explorers mentioned how they had made use of the ideas in the performances, including making a jellyfish from a shower puff following the Under the Sea session and making their own collector bag after the Fantastical Forests story. This revealed that the sessions had had a positive and memorable effect on participants and that the overall aims such as introducing children to new experiences, supporting their language skills and creating memorable and fun experiences in the library were achieved.

Recruited new library users Many respondents had not previously participated in in-house events in libraries – with one parent writing: “*My son loves these events and the library in general, he talks about it all the time*”.

Supported development of communities of practice Collaboration benefitted the professionals involved with many reporting that they had learned much from the experience of working with the youngest children.

Provided theatre at home Presenting a theatre experience in libraries brought this experience as close to home as possible, removing barriers associated with accessibility and cost. And in lockdown, when children were unable to attend in person, animated stories, developed especially for young listeners, were able to be accessed at home online.

Provided music at home This was made possible through the creation of resource bags which were shared with families so that parents could extend children’s learning at home. In addition, during the pandemic, Zoom sessions took place and ten music sessions were placed online which meant that the sessions could be enjoyed over and over again at home by children and their parents and siblings.

Stimulated creating and making activities at home Artists encouraged parents to collect recyclable items gathered at home or out of doors for use in creating and making at home. Parents were then supported with a book, designed to show them how to help their children use the items to create something new. Further inspiration for parents and others was also to be found in a splendid exhibition which showcased the artistry of young children, revealing the importance of process over product.

Barriers and lessons learned

Barriers

Initiating a large programme can be fraught with unexpected difficulties – some of which only emerge in the move from planning to execution, and what is written may not work out in the way anticipated in the original plan. Whilst a known variable was the difference in the physical space in different libraries it was necessary to limit numbers of participants in order to ensure the space would be safe and accessible, particularly to parents with pushchairs or prams.

A plan to use the programmes as a training opportunity for front line library staff did not come to fruition due to staffing capacity and the impact of Covid on logistics.

The arrival of Covid in 2020 signalled the disruption of face-to-face sessions and contingency arrangements were not immediately in place to address this, though new arrangements quickly followed.

Due to the programme's popularity, places on courses were rapidly booked up and this led to some 'would be participants' feeling they were being treated unfavourably.

Whilst places were quickly booked up often actual attendance varied dramatically from the number booked and led to there being unfilled places occasionally.

Lessons learned

Libraries are perceived by users as community spaces and the programme described in this report was multi-stranded and complex in nature because it marked a widening and extension of previous activity in the county's libraries. Key to the success of the programme was a willingness to learn about what worked or went well and what didn't. In all three strands of the programme there was collaboration between library staff and 'experts' of one kind or another – artists, musicians and actors. In all cases the collaboration was negotiated, and the partners were well-matched in their attitudes to learning – that is whilst there was a mutual understanding of goals there was not a fixed idea of the finished product. Indeed reflection and evaluation underpinned the programme so that each strand involved a thread of research – following a pattern of Plan, Do, Review.

Feedback was an essential ingredient both internally and externally – feedback from artists, musicians and creatives as well as feedback from participating children and accompanying adults. Feedback was therefore seen as informative and valuable, creating a lens with which to review each strand of the programme. This flexibility allowed for changes to be made to sessions and meant that planning for subsequent sessions was informed by it.

“Another brilliant Story Explorer's session. We love them!”

“Very welcoming and inclusive. My grandson is autistic and loved it.”

Key findings

- This was an ambitious programme comprising many parts and showcasing the talents of all participants, including those of creatives, artists, illustrators, story writers, children, parents, carers, librarians, teachers, musicians, managers and actors.
- The programme evolved from initial planning stage to become a collaboration of many people with different skills and interests. Over time, each of the three strands of the programme developed its own nature and authenticity.
- Leaders promoted the importance of the creative process and its primacy over the final product.
- All professionals engaged in some CPD focused on understanding young children and their development and in that transformative process their own practice developed as a result of participating in a community of practice.
- Periods of mentoring and reflection supported professionals to understand the learning process that participants such as children and parents/carers were engaged in.
- Feedback was received from parents about their own and their children's experiences of sessions and these findings informed future planning.
- Parents learned new skills as a result of participating in the programme, such as enabling play with recyclable materials gathered in and around the home; and making music with their children or engaging in story play.
- Parents reported that their children had grown in confidence after attending and that they were enthused at the prospect of attending future sessions.
- During Covid and the lockdown period, online sessions were produced in response to the crisis and these continue to be available online, retaining a point of reference for all involved and a legacy resource for people unable to attend face-to-face sessions.



INSPIRING EARLY YEARS

Legacy of the programme

As an outcome of the **Little Creatives** strand, an exhibition, showing the creative journey and hard work that has gone into it is recorded in a fascinating retrospective: Little Creatives exhibition is on tour to five Inspire Library Galleries in 2023. In addition, a book containing twenty-five activities for parents and children to complete at home, using found and recyclable materials has also been published and can be obtained from Nottinghamshire libraries. Additionally, YouTube™ features a series of sessions from this strand of the programme.

A legacy for **Adventures in Music** has been in the cache of ten YouTube™ videos which can be accessed at any time by individuals at home. These are interactive and educational at the same time, introducing children to a range of musical terms and encouraging them to enjoy listening and joining in with a range of well-chosen songs and rhymes. Titles include: The Farm, The Jungle, The Forest, In Space, The Pirate Ship, Land of the Dinosaur, Minibeasts, Monsters and Under the Sea.

During lockdown, Nottingham Playhouse created two online versions of **Story Explorers** which can be accessed online. The two stories, called Rainforest Rescue and Under the Sea are animated and both involve Little Owl and Granny Owl. The familiar faces of Granny Owl and Little Owl have an engaging quality and the intensity and excitement of the stories is suitably matched to the young age group.



Conclusion

This exciting, innovative and challenging programme began after considerable groundwork had been completed by members of the management team of Inspire. It took as its focus the intention to build on previous work by introducing early years children to new experiences, whilst wishing to support their learning and language skills and to create memorable and fun experiences in libraries.

Finding and establishing collaborative partnerships with other organisations and creatives, such as musicians and artists with appropriate skills was exacting and it was recognised that learning would take place in all groups – from those setting up the programme to those executing it on the ground, not forgetting the audience of parents/carers and young children often with babies and buggies in tow! These 'communities of practice' quickly developed, with artists learning from their continuing professional development (CPD) sessions about how young children learn and the way in which the curriculum for Under 5's is constructed. At the same time, learning from observing the children in sessions informed their subsequent practice. Parents too, learned about how their own children learned and benefitted from observing professional artists, musicians and actors enabling their children to play and explore.

Sessions were welcomed and enthusiasm for attending them occasionally led to over-booking of places, which in turn led to lower attendance at sessions, with fewer people appearing than had booked places. This left some families disappointed so it would now be valuable to find ways to ensure that booked places and numbers attending are similar and that there is some follow-up for those that do not attend (no – shows).

It is hoped that current data gathering methods may be supplemented by a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) tool which will allow for greater analysis of distribution, take up of places and absence.

The introduction of a small cost to mitigate the issue of non-attendance did not appear to make a noticeable difference to sessions and it may therefore be wise to build in an element of fidelity to the programme by introducing an incentive such as was used in the Adventures into Music programme, via the pathway document.

Clearly, advertising for the programme was more than successful as the above illustrates, however, a more targeted approach focused on families for whom English is an additional language and those 'hard to reach' groups who do not use libraries, as well as the attendance of more males could widen participation and ensure a more diverse audience than previously.

Evaluations indicate tremendous enthusiasm for all strands of the programme – suggesting that it has largely succeeded in achieving its aims. Greater clarity about the aims and learning intentions of the programme would now be helpful in order to ensure that a true picture of success is captured as a legacy for future work of this nature.

INSPIRING EARLY YEARS

A review of feedback reveals that the majority of adult attendees were female and, whilst it is not entirely clear that this is the case, many of the child participants referred to by their parents/carers appeared also to be female. This may raise questions for research – is it simply that females are care providers or is it that males would not feel comfortable engaging in such activities with other parents. And, do mothers take daughters to these sort of activities rather than sons, who they might take to soccer or soft play? With the exception of the Adventures in Music strand the majority of professionals were female, this may indicate that more women than men pursue the arts, or it may point to a difficulty in recruiting men to ventures involving young children.

Finally, the curve ball thrown by the pandemic appears to have been caught with equanimity and flexibility by Inspire – since original plans had to be abandoned in the face of the Covid pandemic. The ensuing results, using technological solutions, meant that with speed and decisiveness the sessions which had been planned as face-to-face sessions were developed and placed online. Wonderfully, the crisis led to further creativity and the end result is that there is a cache of work left as a legacy for future reference – this includes ten online music sessions, two animated stories in addition to an exciting exhibition of children's work as well as a book of twenty-five Little Creatives projects, for completion at home.

It is pleasing to note that work with the youngest children and their families continues to be supported by the 2023 – 2026 ACE NPO funding allocated to Inspire. This includes artist developments in different art forms for Little Creatives; an expansion of music provision into pre and post-natal age bands via a programme named Lullaby Bank and further developments of story and drama opportunities into interactive and immersive stories in a continuing relationship with Nottingham Playhouse.

“Fab class. My son thoroughly enjoyed movement, yoga and the story aspect of the class. I loved taking part too and watching him have fun; being both excited and calm.”



Recommendations

Capturing the impact of such an extensive programme has been challenging, especially in view of particular barriers presented by lockdown, when normal activity ceased, and new ways of working had to be put in place. Suggested areas, that the programme developers might wish to consider as they enter a further round of the programme, are set out below:

Explore further the range of participants to identify:

- Gender balance of children/parents/carers attending and creatives leading sessions.
- Ethnicity of all participants.
- Predominant age groups attending each of the three strands of the programme.

Explore further patterns of attendance and non-attendance of booked places by:

- Finding ways to incentivise regular attendance at sessions – for example did the music passport attract more loyalty to the sessions?
- Researching reasons for non-attendance of a sample group of five or six children in order to understand families' issues or competing priorities.
- Ensuring that there is a more equitable distribution of tickets – beyond the current first come, first served approach.

Explore ways of further widening participation by:

- Introducing a more pronounced focus on inclusion – by, for example, widening the range of materials in Little Creatives and Story Explorers, introducing artists and musicians whose first language is not English and seeking to achieve a greater balance of gender and ethnicity among creatives, such as musicians and artists, since there were fewer male artists than female artists.

Clarify further what children are learning in sessions by:

- Reviewing learning intentions for each activity in each strand of the programme.
- Developing case studies based on a random sample of children and parents/carers to more thoroughly understand the impact of the programme on both parents/carers and children.
- Considering whether to create a simple assessment tool, similar to the Adventures in Music assessment, to be completed with parents to record children's learning from Story Explorers and Little Creatives sessions.
- Introducing a common template for evaluation of sessions to be used by creatives following each session identifying whether and to what extent the aims of the session were met; areas of strength (what went well) and areas for development.

Appendix 1

Libraries receiving all early years programmes through ACE NPO funding

- Arnold Library
- Beeston Library
- Bingham Library
- Hucknall Library
- Kirkby-in-Ashfield Library
- Mansfield Central Library
- Newark Library
- Retford Library
- Southwell Library
- Sutton-in-Ashfield Library
- West Bridgford Library
- Worksop Library

Additional Libraries and community settings receiving some early years programmes through Miner2Major funding

- Blidworth Library
- Calverton Library
- Edwinstowe Library
- Mansfield Woodhouse Library
- Ollerton Library
- Ravenshead Library
- St. Paulinus Church and Community Hall, Ollerton
- The Social Action Club, Rainworth

Appendix 2

Early Years Settings

- Alphabet House Day Nursery, Beeston
- Alphabet House Day Nursery, West Bridgford
- Bright Sparks, Mansfield
- Busy Bees, Southwell
- Cherubs Day Nursery, Worksop
- Hillside Primary and Nursery School, Hucknall
- Leos Nursery, Arnold
- Mapplewells Primary and Nursery School, Sutton-in-Ashfield
- Rocking Horse Childcare Centre, Kirkby-in-Ashfield
- Serendipitys Day Nursery, Bingham
- Serendipitys Day Nursery, Newark
- West Street Pre-school, Retford

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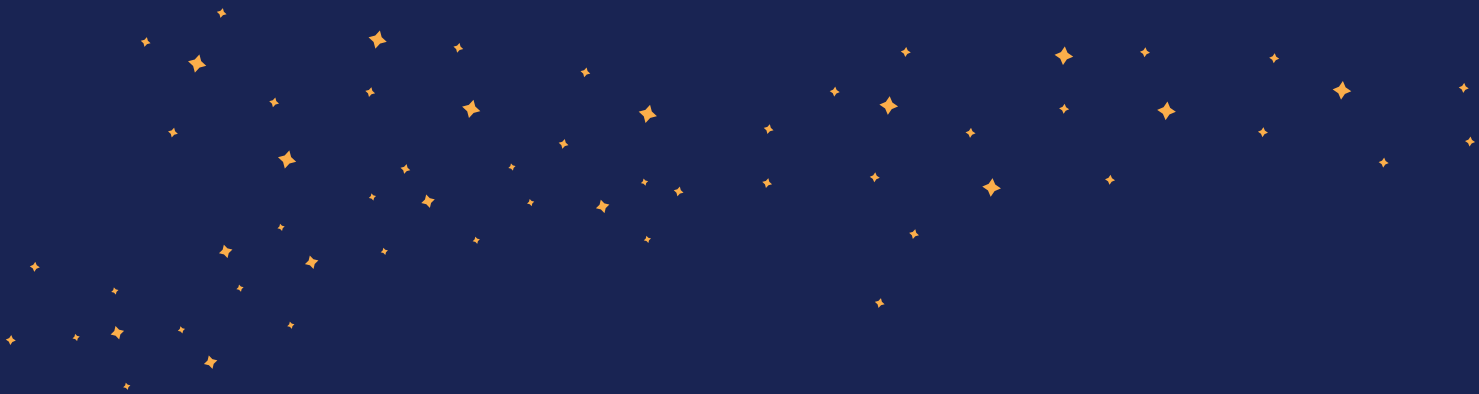
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Notes

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