

Creative encounters beyond the door: supporting children and families through Half Moon Theatre's Early Years Creative Play programme

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the work of Beccy Allen, Head of Creative Learning at Half Moon Theatre, and her creative practitioners, Madeleine Graham and Daniel Mariño, on their extensive Early Years Creative Play (EYCP) programme for families and their children. The programme has been running since 2018, in children's centres and nursery schools across the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, where families are invited to join, and in community spaces where local families are able to drop in. Breaking the tradition of relying

on academic researchers to measure the impact of their programme, Beccy and her team engage with their own evaluation processes to measure the creative encounters that parent and child receive through the EYCP programme. As an outsider looking in, I present in this short article their work so that one can advocate for the continuation of such vital resources for children's creative cultural and artistic lives.

KEYWORDS

ARTS & CULTURE

THEATRE

FAMILIES

EARLY YEARS

CREATIVE PLAY

CREATIVITY



INTRODUCTION

When speaking of the value of arts and culture to society, we almost always begin with their intrinsic value: how arts and culture can illuminate inner lives and enrich emotional worlds (Arts Council England, 2014). When a close look is taken at what constitutes the best kind of natural experience for infants and young children, that also quickly leads to the arts. Arts and cultural activities, if done correctly, can help children develop creativity, imagination, expression, identity and, of course, culture. Yet, this provision is not just bound within a formal education setting; in fact, before children embark on any formal learning, they learn within their home environments, with their parents, carers and families, and communities. Beyond the door, families have access to arts and cultural organisations such as theatres, which can be regarded as a component to add quality to their home learning environments. The evidence of the impact of such organisations on our economy, health, well-being, society and education has been measurable. Yet, the benefits these bring to individual children and their families in other ways are unmeasurable and, in many cases, the only experiences some may ever have.

This article presents the work and impact of one such arts and cultural organisation, Half Moon Theatre, and their vital work with families and their children under the age of five years. The aim is not only to recognise their impact to help arts and culture be seen for what they are, a strategic national resource (Arts Council England, 2014), but also what they bring to young children in their early years in terms of creative development and learning so that one can advocate for the continuation of such vital resources for children's creative cultural and artistic lives.

ARTISTIC AND CULTURAL LIFE

The literature notes that art and culture facilitate participation in the life of society

and contribute to a creative and fulfilling quality of life (CUSP, 2022). Artistic and cultural life is also the essence of Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC; UN, 1989), where it is the right of children 'to participate freely in cultural life and arts', and signatories shall 'respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life... encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity'. For all children, at all ability levels, the arts play a central role in cognitive, motor, language and social-emotional development. They motivate and engage children in learning, stimulate memory and facilitate understanding, enhance symbolic communication, promote relationships and provide an avenue for building competence (Duffy, 2006). The value of arts and culture to children therefore cannot be denied where there is great emphasis on integrating these opportunities to enhance early childhood quality (Susman-Stillman *et al.*, 2018), whether in education or within the home and community.

It is a fact that, whether intentionally or unintentionally, the home frames most of a child's engagement with arts and culture. This is through film, music, television, literature, cultural tools and objects, video games and various forms of digital online activities. The great majority of our experience of music of all kinds, for example, occurs at home or while travelling, though we talk about the cultural experience of music in terms of going to concert halls and music venues. It is in the home that artistic and cultural life begins and is shaped.

The important role of the home learning environment in children's later success has been evidenced time and time again (e.g. Degesford, 2003; Lehl *et al.*, 2012; OECD, 2012; Mudiappa and Kluczniok, 2015). Families' engaging with children in the home has a significant impact on their educational outcomes, and as

a result there have been undeniable ongoing public campaigns developed to engage families about arts and cultural experiences that are essential to their children's development. Evidence suggests that these experiences can help children develop abilities in the arts that will be useful right through life (Sylva *et al.*, 2004); they can strengthen parent-child bonds, engage parents in their children's learning and provide a positive focus for shared experiences and communication (Dower, 2013). Such experiences also offer many parents the ideas, confidence and resources to play with their children as a natural part of everyday life (Jayatilaka, 2010; ImagiNation, 2012).

However, there is a widely held belief that these experiences provided by arts and cultural organisations are a one-off, serving for entertainment only, or as a way for showing impact to receive funding. Artistic and cultural experiences such as theatre, for example, seem to be a popular middle-class phenomenon, where parents who take their children to these places are those who can afford them, and whose socio-economic status enables them to think it is important to do so (Dobrica u.d.) – too many young people from disadvantaged backgrounds never get the chance, although the opportunities exist. This can easily prompt a view of artistic and cultural provision as being rather elitist and restricted, and questions as to how an audience of under-fives experiences and engages with these spaces which are largely unexplored (Patel *et al.*, 2018). Research continues to evidence that the area where you grow up, and your socio-economic background largely determine what types of activities are available beyond the door (Milburn, 2019). On the other end of the scale, however, there is counteracting evidence that the inclusion of high-quality theatre arts in early childhood can provide young children with not only an entertaining and engaging experience but 'opportunities for people who would not otherwise participate in the arts to do so within their local community' (Dodd *et al.*, 2008,

p. 10). The idea is that these experiences complement the home ones. One such artistic and cultural organisation that invests in increasing the spread of theatre to less privileged communities and supports parents with ideas to use at home is Half Moon Theatre.

HALF MOON THEATRE

Historical archives record that the then Half Moon Theatre Company was formed in 1972 when two unemployed actors rented a deserted synagogue in Aldgate, east London, as a cheap place to live and produce plays. The name of the company came from a nearby alley, Half Moon Passage. Today, situated in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, Half Moon produces and presents professional theatre, is in the National Portfolio Organisation of Arts Council England and receives regular funding from the borough, as well as many other supporters. The theatre has been working throughout the borough for a number of years and has established programmes that give children and young people from birth to 18 (or 25 for disabled young people) an opportunity to participate in a variety of drama and theatre activities in various locations such as schools, community settings and at the theatre itself. Evidence on theatre arts suggests that it engages children, improves school readiness skills and reduces the achievement gap (Jindal-Snape *et al.*, 2018). It also enables children to develop their own languages which help shape their individual, community and global identities (Bamford, 2006). Child development specialists note that play is the business of young children as it promotes and enhances their development, and that the arts, in whatever form, are a natural vehicle for it (Barton, 2015). English & Broadhead (2005) have also reported positively on play-based learning and the growth of creativity in young children that is supported by the theatre in the classroom with open-ended role-play materials.

To continue to combat the wider context of recent concerns that the arts privilege

certain audiences in terms of their appeal and accessibility (Miles, 2019, p. 4), Beccy Allen, the Head of Creative Learning at Half Moon Theatre, is dedicated to widening access and participation, aiming to make her theatre's work accessible to as many children as possible regardless of their circumstances. Miles's (2019) recent research which explored the incentives and barriers governing families' access to theatre, recommends that through their work in schools, theatres should establish close working relationships with teachers as advocates for theatre amongst families, make contact with parents directly through visits by theatre staff to schools, and where possible communicate clearly the benefits of theatrical experiences for children and families. Beccy has been building on these long-standing community partnerships with settings and schools, enabling them to offer a gateway for families from the most diverse and deprived areas to access the theatre, whereby children from an early age can engage with Half Moon at a continuum into adulthood. In community settings, families find out through word of mouth and make the decision to attend themselves, and within nursery schools the staff encourage parents of attending children to bring a younger sibling to a session with Half Moon professionals. There is no doubt that theatre supports children's creative potential and creative learning, and one such initiative aimed at doing this is Half Moon's extensive Early Years Creative Play programme which engages the families and their children in communities local to its base.

THE EARLY YEARS CREATIVE PLAY PROGRAMME

The EYCP programme runs weekly sessions over a term of ten weeks aiming to increase parent/carer engagement with their child and increase their well-being, thus developing the family relationship. The sessions are 45 minutes long, with additional free play at the start or end to encourage socialisation between families,

whereby children and parents can spend quality time together and build their confidence whilst playing and engaging. Creative approaches to challenging behaviour are also offered within the delivery to empower parents and carers with new techniques to set boundaries for their children in the home. Russian psychologist Vygotsky (cited in Lindqvist, 2003) has argued that all human beings are creative and that children's play and creative development are linked. Using this as a base, a structured creative social space is offered that provides parents and children with a narrative-driven approach to play that supports them to build imaginative play that is child-led and focused on the connection between them, where parent and child can learn from and support one another.

The programme consists of artistic, creative and physical workshops. Madeleine Graham and Daniel Mariño have been working on the programme since it started. They are a professional team of trained and experienced creative practitioners in theatre who research, devise and prepare relevant materials and projects for the programme. Both Madeleine and Daniel strive to create a strong link between ideas and materials they use in their workshops and objects that can be found in the home so that parents/carers can replicate the activities and continue learning for the children. Creative expression is encouraged through areas of music, theatre, dance or creative movement, and the visual, media and literary arts. The sessions encourage vocabulary development, modelling with parents' positive dynamics, and interactions with children. The aim is for parents to gain the necessary knowledge and skills to extend creative play with their child using everyday items and enhancing their own confidence and personal development when doing so.

To encourage the children to stretch their imaginations in their own creative play, Madeleine and Daniel work with themes in their weekly sessions and

have a specific imaginative location that the children and parents visit together through their imaginations and creative activities. Through storytelling and creative activities, children take imaginary journeys to the park, the beach, the forest, the jungle, the desert and even outer space. This allows young children to explore their bodies and their imaginations, encouraging them to feel confident with creative movement, which ultimately impacts their physical development. Madeleine and Daniel start with a gentle warm-up that focuses on simple language and imitation. The activities then move on to introduce the participants to characters and creatures and scenarios in the imaginative location and help them build interaction with all those elements. For instance, in the Magical Forest session, Madeleine and Daniel lead the participants to explore trees and falling leaves, meet different forest animals, climb through spider's webs, find the magical castle over the stepping stones, meet a witch, retrieve the magical eggs, and dance with butterflies.

IMPACT OF THE EYCP PROGRAMME

Quantifying the benefits of such programmes and expressing them in terms of facts and figures which evidence the contribution made to children and their families has always presented a problem. However, it is something that arts and culture organisations will always have to do in order to secure funding from both public and private sources (Arts Council England, 2014, p. 14). Normally they look to academic institutions to help measure the impact and to 'prove' a programme viable; however, this does not discourage organisations like Half Moon from investing in their own processes in showing the relevance of their programme and the impact they are making. To really understand the impact of the EYCP programme, and to discover why it may have an effect on parent practice with their children, Beccy and her team have developed

their own evaluation tools to help review the change that happens for children and their parents/carers. This includes pre- and post-project questionnaires, witness statements, family focus groups and direct observations that capture thick descriptions of exactly how the programme is implemented, how the parents and children engage and what progress is being made towards Half Moon's aims and objectives. This information is needed to see where the impact of their work is felt, and where they don't yet reach. There is also the need to want to understand how they can do better so that arts and culture can be truly enjoyed by everyone. It also determines the extent to which a change in an outcome can be attributed to the programme itself (Burke, 1998) but at the same time acknowledges that individuals may experience an intervention differently and these multiple realities need to be documented (Clarke, 1999).

THE SOCIAL / CREATIVE / CONNECTION MODEL

Half Moon has produced a tool noted as *Social / Creative / Connection*. This work is informed by the Five to Thrive (KCA, 2022) model but simplified. The Five to Thrive model is a way of understanding how connected relationships are fundamental to human well-being and help us to build resilient communities. It focuses on talking, playing, relaxing, engaging and responding. However, Beccy explains that they focus on the three main markers that they feel can be created through their sessions but also impacted by the sessions: social engagement, creative engagement and connection – the latter being the parent's engagement with their own child. These are marked from 1 to 5 (5 being excellent, 1 being unable to) with observation notes made by the creative practitioners. Beccy states:

'Across all of our programmes, we look for three markers of progression for our young participants – these are often tailored outcomes around something in the realms of confidence,

creative expression and social interaction. Through conversation with those working in the early years fields where we were delivering our early years projects, including EYCP, we were keen for the sessions to explore ways that the connection between the child and their parent could be impacted by their involvement in creative activities, as well as the parent and child's social skills and creative skills.'

Through this model, Half Moon has found links between participation in the programme and various personal and social, and developmental outcomes, such as social and emotional health, cognitive skills and motor functions, and overall quality of the child–parent relationship. Critical skills that are fostered through the programme are listening, speaking, imagining, inventing, creating and critically responding. This indicates that the quality of the programme and its relevance to particular groups is important. Overall evaluation of the programme has found that the first sessions can be very difficult to generate attendees for, given the low levels of confidence of some families in the community to try new creative activities, particularly those who are already considered hard to reach. The uptake in a particular setting, however, is much more consistent.

CONCLUSION

Theatre as a site for learning in a community context can provide informal creative learning opportunities for young children and their families that otherwise they might not experience, and well before they embark on formal learning. It also highlights the importance of theatre as an artistic and cultural experience and how its application beyond children's homes allows space for many creative encounters. The Half Moon EYCP programme may be said to offer a level playing field of sorts, a non-threatening environment for risk-taking and trust-building that can play a unique role in cultivating a sense of comfort and rapport on the part of the parent.

However, a crucial challenge that remains for Beccy and her team is to reach and engage particular cultural groups within their base. This could be achieved through a fact-finding task to establish what particular arts and cultural activities cultures and communities engage with themselves, where Half Moon can then incorporate and connect the artistic choices of the theatre to the needs of the hard-to-reach audience groups. This could further improve or increase the capacity of the programme and its sustainability in the future. Further, there needs to be a gathering of evidence of engagement between what families learn in the programme and what they do within the home. There is also the question of what happens when the EYCP programme ends: will this be the only experience they ever embark upon or do families and their children continue to engage with creative encounters beyond the door? ■

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