

Easterside Primary Academy

EY Enquiry Summer 2016

The Headteacher was joined by a group of Early Years leaders from schools in the area to explore practice and provision in the Early Years at Easterside. In the course of the morning each classroom and the outdoor provision were visited a number of times by groups of enquirers. Those observations were interspaced with conversations within the enquiry team about what they were experiencing and what they were learning. There were also conversations with the Headteacher, with the Early Years Leader in Easterside and the teachers in those classrooms. The quality of what the team in Easterside has created is absolutely striking. In exploring what appeared to be the key elements of why that was a number of ideas emerged.

Insistence, and pace not speed.....

It was in the way in which adults worked their groups during key worker time that this idea emerged. There was no hiding place, children who's attention strayed were instantly drawn back in and the adult didn't move forward until she he knew she had the engagement of every child in her group. These sessions often had real pace and a sense of urgency as children were invited to respond to a series of prompt cards. However the awareness and understanding of those professionals meant they were prepared to slow down and focus in when they spotted something that needed developing or reinforcing. This was really skillful work which placed a high level of expectation on children, an expectation they consistently rose too.

Conversation, Preparation and Anticipation.....

The consistent way in which each of the different groups worked in every classroom spoke of the conversations which take place between adults at the start and at the end of every session. This consistency was on two levels. The first was in the content of the lessons we observed. It was obvious that every professional had absolute clarity about what the purpose of that session was and the outcomes they aspired for children to achieve. The second level was about the consistency of pedagogy we experienced. It was really apparent that over time a consistent approach to teaching and learning had been developed. And this approach was visible in the practice of every professional in the setting. *These were professionals who knew not just what to do but why they were doing it.* Those ongoing conversations between adults were also apparent during continuous provision. So much of what goes on in those sessions is about adults skillful responses to the things children choose to engage with. So many of those things can't be planned for but great preparation, preparation which includes anticipating what those responses might be means adults can be at their most effective in moving children's learning forward.

Routine and the place of TRAINING.....

The whole morning was shaped by the prompts and signals adults give to children so that the very most is made of every minute of learning time. Routines have been established and children have been trained to work within those routines. That training and the deep understanding children have of the expectations those routines create, enables fantastic levels of independent learning to take place. The ordered familiarity of the environment contributes to this, there is a place for everything and everything has its place. In that context children can take genuine ownership of their learning.

The Paradox of Crowded Space.....

There was a lot happening in the classrooms and a rich variety of activities available for children to engage with. On first impressions these were crowded busy classrooms but the longer one lingered and observed what was happening the more a sense of space emerged. This was partly due to the idea of everything having its place and children having routines to ensure things weren't spread across the floor and then abandoned for something more interesting. However what was really striking was how children clustered around activities and each of those clusters had ample space to explore what they were engaged with.

Intensification.....

The theories that underpin the idea of continuous provision speak of an environment being created where children can exercise choice about what they engage with, the role of adults is to intervene to deepen and extend those learning opportunities. That process was apparent in the way in which classrooms were organised. However what we also saw were the ways in which those opportunities are intensified. The planning boards children used to organise their day and adults used to keep them focused were an aspect of this. What we also saw were adults gathering focus groups for short intense sessions during continuous provision. Flexible groups drawn together because assessments were telling teachers that those children needed extra input in a particular area. This intensification was also apparent in the challenge adults presented children within the key worker group phonics sessions. High levels of challenge built upon fabulous relationships enabling children to make great progress.

Team Workers and Social Learners.....

There was a real sense of togetherness in these classrooms, adults and children who believed in one another and wanted to do well for one another. There were huge levels of positivity, children being praised and the reasons for that praise given in ways that 'stuck' to other children. What we also saw were children who were skilful collaborative learners, able to work together around a challenge teachers had presented them with. Talking things through and exploring their ideas together, for children so young there was a real sense that they were social learners.

Meaty Activities, Persistence and Deep Learning.....

It was the children's persistence that was striking, scanning the classrooms and more especially the outside areas, we saw children who stuck at the tasks they were engaged with. That persistence and the quality of the conversations they were engaged with led us to the idea of deep learning. Often deepened by the skilful interventions of adults. However what we felt underpinned all of this was the thoughtful design of the activities those children were engaged with. Adults had designed really meaty activities that children found engaging and because of this they were able to engage in deeper ways than would otherwise have been possible.

Self-managing learners.....

Adults are always there to guide and prompt, however we felt the children's ability to self-manage their learning was absolutely fantastic. Their use of their planning boards was an aspect of this, but we also felt that noise levels were self-managing and the sophisticated language children were using in their conversations with one another meant they were helping one another to learn. An environment has been created where children have huge levels of independence and that has moved to huge levels of inter-dependence. As a result children are genuinely able to take responsibility for their own learning.

Noticing and Responding.....

And modelling, modelling, modelling..... Scanning and intervening may be a good way to describe what we came to describe as noticing and responding. They were the moments during continuous provision when an adult stood back from the busyness of the learning environment, scanned then decided where next to intervene. These are really powerful interventions, moments when an adult listened to how children's ideas had developed then sowed fresh possibilities into their conversations. These were moments that couldn't be scripted for, moments when adults grabbed the opportunity to move learning forward. And what we heard in so many of those interventions was adults modelling; modelling through their questioning how children might question one another, but also modelling how children could go about solving problems for themselves.

Pride and Ambition - a virtuous circle.....

We felt the professionals in Easterside were rightfully proud of what they have created. The environment is stunning, skilful and committed professionals lead learning, children have fantastic habits for learning and everyone - adults and children - patently enjoys being in those classrooms. The children share that pride and the quality of what they create. What we heard all day long were conversations where adults and children shared their pride in what was being achieved, then adults invited children to be even more ambitious about what they could achieve. And we saw children responding to those invitations. An idea developed of a virtuous circle – greater pride led to greater ambition and greater ambition led to greater pride!

Reflections and Questions – An Invitation to Reflect Upon the Outcomes.....

The enquiry team left Easterside buzzing, what has been created is absolutely fantastic. Hugely committed and skilful adults provide an extraordinary place for young children to learn. The following ideas are some reflections and questions to shape the conversations that the team might have about continuing to develop their practice and the provision they have created

Environment and space for imagination.....

Children appeared to be more engaged by resources such as tyres and plastic crates than the manufactured fixed apparatus. We wondered if that was to do with those resources leaving more space for their imaginations, and what that might mean for provision?

Using whiteboards well.....

There were moments when, having developed some fantastic ideas on their whiteboards, children were then asked to wipe them clean. This got us thinking about the different uses of whiteboards and the need to record 'evidence of learning'

Making Planning Boards more powerful.....

The way in which planning boards guide children's learning and develop their ability to make discerning choices was fascinating. One of our conversations was about how they might be used to track children's learning.

Guided Writing and Independent Writing.....

It may have been to do with the point at which we observed the sequence of learning which meant we saw an awful lot of guided writing and we wondered how this linked to the children's development of independent writing.