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Reach for the Stars! Creative engagement with young children

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Creativity is an area of great interest in the current context within the UK. It is fundamental to successful learning however somehow education removes our artistic and creative abilities and affects the development of important skills such as problem solving. This paper builds on the initial findings of an evaluation report conducted by a university research team, assessing the impact of Starcatchers, an organisation developing performing arts experiences for children aged 12 weeks to 4 years. It focuses on an analysis of the engagement
of these young children and suggests that active engagement in creative experiences promote a sense of self-worth in young children, supporting children's health and well-being and may help to combat the effects of social disadvantage experienced by many young children and their families in the current cultural and social context within Scotland, indicating lessons for implementing effective artists in residence programmes to develop children's creativity in future.

Keywords: Starcatchers; creativity; social disadvantage; educational artist-in residence; self-worth and educational well-being

Introduction

This paper explores the potential impact on very young children who have been exposed to creative experiences, supported by parents or carers, through the medium of performance art delivered in their local communities by Starcatchers: an art organisation.

Current context

In Scotland, there is widespread support for a strong political agenda focusing on the outcomes of providing services for small children and their families and an increased recognition of the importance of the early years as an indicator for success in later life and the importance of starting early – with families pre-birth. The Scottish Government aims to create change for children and families and this aim is supported by reports such as the Early Years Framework (The Scottish Government, 2009), 'Getting it right for every child' (The Scottish Government, 2008) and Growing Up in Scotland (2010).

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It has been proposed by many theorists that distorted maternal – child attachment may affect the mother child relationship and their interactions – both in nature and quality (Bowlby, 1969, 1988, 1999 [1982]; Mercer, 2006; Rutter, 1972; Spitz & Wolf, 1946) and calls have been made by Bennett (2008), Sinclair (2007) and from international studies – Starting Strong I and II (OECD, 2001, 2006) to prioritise research on the impact that poverty has on the very youngest children and their families. The Starcatchers project focused on areas of high social and economic deprivation in order to address maternal – child attachment to enhance the quality of interactions between main carers and the very youngest children. Each performance was produced and performed within each local environment in order to develop and extend links in the community and with the community. Easterhouse is situated in the east end of Glasgow which is the most deprived city and local authority area in Scotland. Almost half of Glasgow's residents – 285,000 people – reside in the 20% of the most deprived areas in Scotland, while just 17,000 people (3% of the population) live in 10% of the least deprived areas in Scotland. A third of Glaswegian children live in households where no-one works (33%), a figure which is much higher the Scottish average (19%) and around two-thirds of Glaswegian children live in low income families, a similar figure to other UK cities such as Liverpool and Birmingham (Understanding Glasgow-The Glasgow Indicators Project, 2012).

Trevarthen (2011) asserts that young children have the right to a stable and supported family situation, to a rich and responsive community and to a natural environment and suggests that:

> The message for politician, administrators and managers of services for early childhood is that efforts should be made to sustain practices on the local scale that serve these rights well, regardless of cost. The money required will be well spent and recuperated in abundance, and the precious development of human ingenuity will be respected and nourished. (p. 188)

Rogoff (1990) also places importance on the necessary part that family and society plays in the development of young children's cognitive development and explores the use of 'cultural tools' as a means by which young children are guided by more skilled others, supported in their development through a form of apprenticeship. This idea is further developed by Roberts (2011) who talks about 'companionable learning' (pp. 199 – 200). One of the main components of children's well-being is the construct of communication which Roberts describes as consisting of two components: received communication (what the child experiences) and expressed communication (how the child responds). 'Companionable learning' is identified by Roberts (2011) as learning which takes place through active engagement with others and with the world; and which relies on the mutual state of intersubjectivity with the child and the 'other' in an emotionally secure relationship with definite links made to Trevarthen's (2011) views on infant/parent partnership and the child's drive to make 'human' sense of engaging experiences and share these not only during the experiences but to also remember, recall and act on these memories. The quality of a learning experience can also be determined in line with the concept of 'flow' based on the involvement or engagement of participants (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Further study undertaken by Csikszentmihalyi (2002) has led to an awareness of the benefits creativity brings to all aspects of children's well-being (Hope, 2008).

Children's engagement in their own learning has been researched in recent years with studies such as Taguchi (2010), Stephen, Ellis, and Martlew (2009), Stephen,
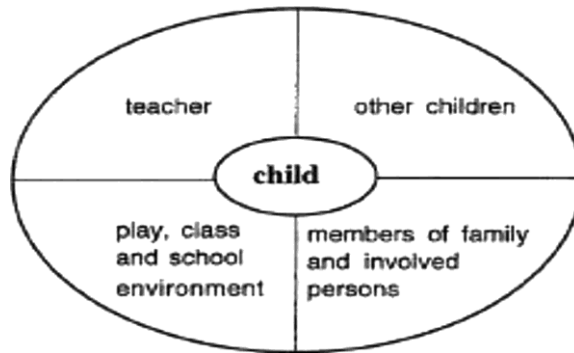
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Figure 1.   Laevers four relational fields (2005).

Ellis, and Martlew (2010), Martlew, Stephen, and Ellis (2011) and Martlew, Ellis, Stephen, and Ellis (2010).

Laevers (2005) discusses the importance of involvement to develop and strengthen children's overall health and well-being. He states that there are key features in determining children's level of well-being, he calls these 'four relational fields' with the child at the centre (see Figure 1). The child's well-being is related to each of the relational fields.

Laevers also gives a summary of key words related to a child's involvement: active, concentrating, interested, asking questions, inquisitive, interacting, focused and astonishment. In order to develop a high level of involvement, the child has to be offered complex choices and open-ended experiences which encourage creativity. Laevers (2000) describes creativity as a 'disposition'; one which produces unique or novel ways to problem solve and which encourages viewing things from different angles.

Creativity in babies and young children begins with learning through the senses and through movement (Bruner, 1996, 1990; Donaldson, 1992; Piaget, 1990) and is supported by the relationships babies form with particular people and the child's opportunity to develop the ability to predict, participate and to take risks in a safe context (Bruce, 2004). Babies and young children make 'sense' of their world by constantly interpreting it through the use of their senses – how it looks, feels, sounds, what it does and can do. Trevarthen (1998) describes the drive young children have to make sense of their world through 'sharing experiences and purposes with other minds' (p. 87).Very young babies' responsiveness and ability to instigate action in others: their musicality (Malloch & Trevarthen, 2010) informs us that babies can and do engage in intentional behaviours. The relationship that babies develop with parents and carers and the understandings of intersubjectivity of companionships (Hobson, 2002) enables us to understand the importance of sensitive interactions and the benefits of sharing creative endeavour with the youngest children.

The Starcatchers project (the first of its kind in Scotland) was established following an initial award from the Creative Scotland National Lottery Inspire Fund and was launched in October 2006. It aims to bring a unique focus to the benefits of creative exposure by offering arts based experiences to very young children and their parents or carers, focusing on the value of such engagement. There is also a recognition of the potential legacy in the longer term based on the impact of positive creative family experiences and that input in the early years will lead to increased engagement

in later life. In 2009, additional funding was granted and phase two of the project commenced with the recruitment of four artists in residence each allocated to a hosting venue: Tramway, Glasgow; The Platform, Easterhouse; Carnegie Hall, Dunfermline, Fife and the Byre Theatre, St Andrews, Fife. The four artists, each with a different set of experiences, developed and produced performances in cycles of experimentation, feedback, reflection and new action. Funding was also awarded for an evaluation project and a research team from the University of Strathclyde was appointed to evaluate the process. Four action researchers were individually matched and attached to one venue and their role was to collaborate with the artist-in residence; observe children's engagement, provide feedback, discuss ongoing work, record the processes of project development and reflect on the arts-related experiences offered by their matched artist.

The artist discussed in this paper is Matt Addicott, a performance maker and director and artist-in residence at the Platform, Easterhouse. The performances observed, recorded and analysed in relation to children's engagement were The Elf, The Incredible Swimming Choir 1 & 2 and First Light 1 & 2.

The benefits of having artists in residences as designed by the Starcatchers theatre group allows for each specific artist to establish an effective and evolving working relationship with the local community and enables them to develop their awareness of the specific needs of this locally. The length of the residency period (two years) allowed the artist to reflect on a regular basis to ensure children were challenged and engaged in creative experiences, by planning performances encouraging children to discover, look, listen and touch, be excited or relaxed and participate through their own engagement.

This model of implementation meaning that although the artists and audience are both separate and interrelated, as are artists and venues, and venues, community and audiences, each are embraced, influenced and informed by their wider supporting systems. Here ecological systems theory is helpful (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) showing how the microsystems of each identified 'voice' interrelates to each other (Figure 2).

Another consideration in the Starcatchers' model of artists in residence relates to Bruner's ideas of the importance of children having knowledge about the nature of performance itself, opportunities for choice regarding the level of their involvement and collaboration with the performance, the artist and the audience – this brings about action and diversity rather than a conformist approach. Lave's communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1998) suggests that learning is not a solitary activity, but involves participation, engagement, activity in situ, recognising young children as co-constructor and as audience in situations where value is placed on the activity, a sense of belonging.

Methodology

The research took the form of a small-scale exploratory study focused on artists in residence within the Starcatchers arts organisation. The research questions were:

(1) What is the nature of theatre and art-based performance for and with young children?
(2) What does the artists' experience of designing and implementing participative performance events tell us about the nature and processes of working with young children in performing arts?
(3) What do the children gain as a result in participation in performing arts experiences?
(4) What do parents and carers and communities gain as a result of their participation in the arts process and the impact on their children's wellbeing and development? (Dunlop, McNaughton, Grogan, Martlew, & Thomson, 2011, p. 15)
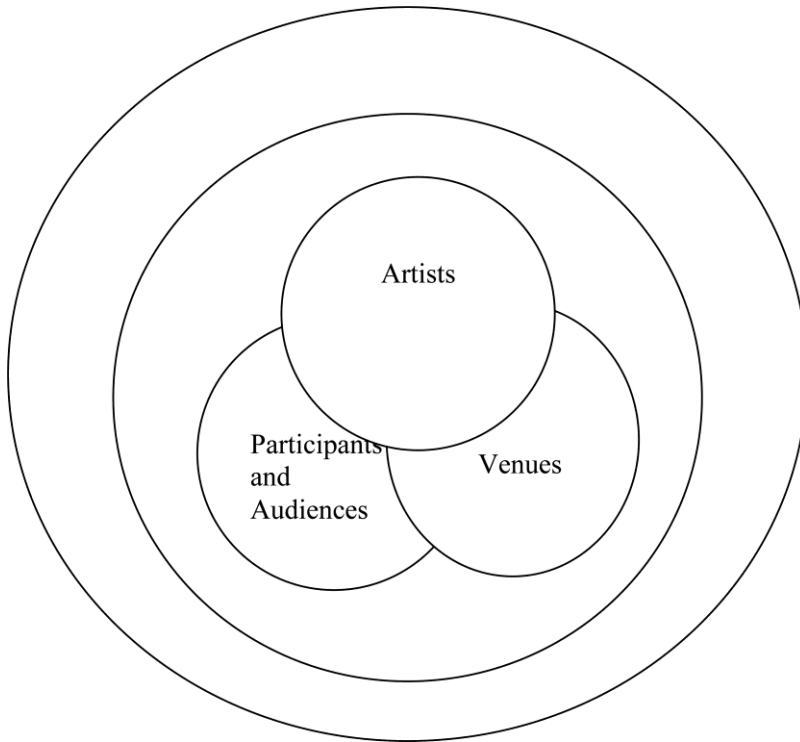
Figure 2.   Interlocking systems created through linkages between artists, participants/audiences and venues (Dunlop et al., 2011, p. 9).

The research focused on four artists in residence working in four different geographical areas of Scotland. Each artist was matched to a designated researcher and this matching was based on the researcher's own area of expertise in relation to the artist's performances.

Data were collected at four levels; from the artist, observations of the children and interviews with staff and parents. This paper focuses only on the data collected from the observations of the children. Data from the artists were gathered in a variety of ways including semi-structured interviews focusing on the design and implementation of their performances, questionnaires and written notes from discussions with the researcher and the artists before and after performances. Each artist was invited to share data which s/he gathered, for example, her/his own records of performances, reflective accounts, blogs (it was a requirement of the residency that each artist complete a regular reflective account, in the form of a blog, in which they recorded their thoughts, plans, descriptions of processes and reflections on the events in which they were involved), photographs or videos recording particular events.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The artists were asked a variety of questions concerning the planned performances, their reflections and evaluation of the outcomes of their own practice, their conception of their role and the experiences and engagement offered to the young participants.

Targeted observations of artists' and children's actions were conducted at performances identified by both the artist and the researcher throughout the duration of the

Signal Descriptors

Signals	Descriptor
Attuned	Watching, tracking and cued in to what is going on
Absorbed	Intense attention for a period and ignores any distraction
Mirroring	Watching and reciprocating through approximately repeating or copying
Responsive	Positive body language, social referencing, following verbal and non-verbal narrative and smiling/reaching/nodding
Interactive	Physically responding and doing, in 2 way exchange with another
Instigative	Provokes action in others through own responsive action or vocalisation
Experimental	Taking individual action, with materials, props, instruments

Figure 3.   Signal descriptors.

evaluation period of one year. On each of these occasions, the performance and setting were scanned every 10 minutes throughout the duration of the event and the researcher noted the form of performances organisation, the actions of the artists, and the actions of the children and the level of engagement of the children. Timed observations of the performance and of target children (Sylva et al., 1980) were also carried out between the performance scans. All target children were selected randomly in each setting and on most occasions each target child was subject to three periods of observation during the session. Each of the target child observations lasted for approximately five minutes, focusing on what the child was doing, who was with her/him, interactions with other children or adults and behavioural indicators of engagement. A judgement was made by the researcher regarding the level of the child's engagement using a set of seven signals – 'attuned', 'absorbed', 'mirroring', 'responsive', 'interactive', 'instigative' and 'experimental'. These signals were developed during a shared research team analysis of the PEEP production recordings (Starcatchers Pilot Project, 2009) expanding a set of original types of engagement 'absorbed engagement' and 'interactive engagement' (Young & Powers, 2008). These signals informed the observations and formed the basis of coding the narrative records, photographs and video episodes (see Figure 3).

The categorisation of the actions was subject to inter-rater reliability checks with a very high degree of agreement reached on the most frequently observed actions. Although these are relatively high-inference judgments we ensured satisfactory inter-rater reliability before commencing the data collection and drew on earlier experience of using behavioural indicators of children's affective states (Stephen, 2003).

Results

The table in Figure 4 provides a detailed summary of each of the engagement signals and the range of performances. The children involved displayed high levels of attunement, responsiveness and absorbed engagement. Instigative engagement signal was consistently scored low, due possibly to the age of the children, the unfamiliar environment and through the design of the performances featuring more emphasis on movement rather than vocalisation. Indeed the only performance which scored on this indicator was The Incredible Swimming Choir which demonstrated not only movement but also singing.

Performance	The Incredible Swimming Choir 22.5.10	The Incredible Swimming Choir 4.11.10	The Elf 2 15.12.10	First Light 26.8.10	First Light 30.8.10	Summary Total
	No of Times	No of Times	No of Times	No of Times	No of Times	No of Times
attuned	11	10	10	21	9	61
absorbed	8	9	0	7	13	37
mirroring	5	6	4	6	7	28
responsive	8	12	9	15	14	58
interactive	5	9	2	8	1	25
instigative	0	2	0	0	0	2
experimental	2	7	1	3	1	14

Figure 4.   Summary of children's level of engagement. Artist: Matt Addicott.

The table highlights the range of performances that were designed and produced by the artist Matt Addicott, Starcatchers. Each performance scored highly in the attuned category although there is a marked difference between the first performance of First Light and the second performance. In the first performance, the score was 21 as opposed to 9 in the second performance. One could speculate that this difference may have occurred due to the age of the audience or as a result of the minor changes that took place following discussions with the artist, the researcher and the actors involved in this second performance. Other scores related to First Light are generally consistent apart from attuned and interactive engagement. Little interaction took place between the children in the second performance and again one could suggest that this is a result of the lack of the children being attuned at the beginning. However, the score for absorbed is slightly higher in the second performance so despite the other two scores children clearly were absorbed in this performance.

In the second performance, the majority of the children in the audience were from a nursery establishment and were accompanied by staff members. The staff members supervised the children closely and constantly reminded the children that they should 'behave', that is, not leave their seats, call out or become involved in any interaction with the actors or the props.

Children throughout each performance mirrored the actors through watching the movements of lights or the object on the stage. Exaggerated movements or surprise was replicated by the children. The age range of the children varied from three months to five years and children responded very often according to their developmental stage, with younger children focusing on the movement, lights and sounds while older children were more responsive and demonstrated mirroring actions. One particular child, a baby boy aged seven months, was observed on several occasions by the researcher.

1.46pm. Baby (7months) is staring up at the ceiling lights.
1.48pm. Baby (7months) stares intently as Dawn (actor) wraps up an apple. He wriggles up onto his feet and dances, bouncing as he scans the audience. He looks behind him at his mum and then leans forward and stares at Dawn. Dawn blows a kiss and he smiles. He lies on his front on the carpet area staring at Dawn. He moves back closer to his mum as a cow moos.
1.53. The narrator talks as Man in the Moon dances. Baby (7mths) withdraws into mother's arms and makes a small noise of protest; he looks a little wary.
1.54. He continues to makes small distress noises as Man in the Moon dances.
1.55. Baby (7mths) still distressed, crying quietly but turns to watch the action. He continues to sit on mum's knee but now watching the action.

1.57. Baby (7mths) stops crying and stares at the moon light open.
1.59pm. Baby (7mths) looks intensely at the star lights on the backdrop. He continues to stare.
2.01pm. Baby (7mths) is staring at the ceiling lights. He turns to look at dancers and smiles as they roll on the floor.
2.03pm. Baby (7mths) leans forward as Man in the Moon somersaults and disappears. He coos and tries to crawl forwards. He rolls onto sitting position.
2.04pm. Baby (7mths) is cooing and smiling. He tries to crawl forward. He is pulled back by mum. He shakes his head. Watches intently as cloud moves down from the ceiling.

This performance commenced at 1.45 p.m. and finished at 2.05 p.m. These excerpts demonstrate that the child was attuned and absorbed throughout the duration of this performance and demonstrated absorbed, attuned and responsive engagement throughout the whole duration of the performance, indicating a level of concentration not always associated with very young children.

The Elf performance scored low on various categories in particular experimental, instigative and absorbed engagement. One of the main influences noticed by the researcher was the high level of direction afforded to the children by the nursery professionals who participated along with the actor throughout the performance. The children were unsure at times of the expected responses of the differing adults and when unsure followed the lead of the known childcare professional. The nursery staff closely directed the involvement, and as such influenced the levels of children's engagement with the performance. The Swimming Choir was generally consistent in the scores allocated to the two performances. No visual images could be taken at the time of the researcher's observations to allow the performance to be revisited due to child protection issues although one factor that was recorded was the different role one particular adult adopted through this performance and how this enhanced the overall experience for the child. One mother shortly after entering the swimming pool appeared disengaged not only with the environment but also with her two sons; one of whom would not come near her as she was shouting at him. However, once the singing started she sang along to all of the songs and at the end of performance engaged in a long and animated conversation with two older girls in the pool and was then joined by her sons. There was a lot of talk and laughter and as they left the pool the mother sang in the changing room and tried to encourage her sons to join in. One can assume that this positive experience would provide an opportunity for continued discussion at home based on this shared creative performance.

Discussion

There is always going to be a slight variation in engagement signal scores which can be affected by the setting, the audience or in particular the role of the adults. It was noted by the researcher that some adults had a tendency to over direct the children by instructing when and how they could participate thereby encouraging the children to be passive listeners instead of active participators. In several of the performances, the engagement signal of instigative was scored zero, possibly due to the large number of factors in relation to the environment and the number of adults involved. The environments for these performances were familiar to most of the children; however, in the environments of the local nursery and the local swimming pool the norms of behaviour did not match the expectations of the artist in terms of the children becoming involved in the performance and interacting with the environment or with the audience or the materials/props. The adults' own experience of theatre was to listen and to watch the performance

whereas Starcatchers aimed to allow the children to re-enact the show or to explore the stage as a learning environment.

In the Elf performances, there were low scores for several categories such as experimental, instigative and absorbed engagement. In performances such as this type where the children are accompanied by childcare professionals the actor must be clear about the purpose of each performance and consider how to engage the young child throughout. Discussion should take place with the childcare staff prior to the performance to ensure that they are also clear about the purpose of the performance. Reflection on each performance is key and is crucial in order to enhance the experience for the children and to develop the actor's key skills. Discussion did take place with the actor throughout the project but a set formula to structure reflection would be an advantage in order to promote a set skill base for future performances.

The main differences in the children's level of engagement in relation to the two performance of The Incredible Swimming Choir and the higher incidences of mirroring and instigative engagement were the age range of the participating children. Several of the children in the first performance were older, aged 4–5 years and as such were more independent and secure in the water, not relying on the close proximity to the adult carers. This allowed them to be more active in the pool and in one case, a child aged four years instigates action by grabbing a prop from the actors and begins throwing it. At the end of the performance, two of the children clapped spontaneously, indicating that participation in a creative performance was not a new experience for them, they were aware of the societal norms surrounding performance.

Conclusions

Csikszentmihalyi (1997, p. 23) claimed that, 'creativity does not happen inside people's heads but in the interaction between a person's thought and a sociocultural context'. Thus, those working with children can help them develop their creativity by examining the sociocultural context in which the children and adults are operating. Once examined, that context can be shaped, manipulated and enriched in ways that will nurture creativity. The sociocultural context that children find themselves in includes the physical environment, the quality of the space offered to children, the resources that are available to the children and the quality of the interactions between adults and children and between children and children.

Improving the quality of the sociocultural context is no simple matter. As Fryer (1996, p. 26) states, 'relevant criteria but no definitive criteria' exist for creativity. This makes researching creativity and offering definitive advice for those working with children on how to develop it in children problematic. However, common threads can be identified from the key observation from the Starcatchers project which link to the engagement signals which were designed by the team for this specific project. The observations from the project strengthened the notion that children's creativity can be extended through the provision of resources that encouraged exploration and experimentation in children, allowing them to be flexible in their thinking and creation.

For each performance, children were encouraged to use resources in creative ways. A performance consisted of resourceful environment, space, a range of artists and music. Children immediately took time to scan the environment prior to focusing on their participation and the development of their creativity.

Some of the resources were familiar to the children but were presented in new ways thereby allowing children to explore them in a new light; children had some knowledge of a choir but not a singing choir in the swimming pool. Links were made between knowledge and taken to a new level through the transference of the environment or a new way to explore a resource. Each performance allowed the children to 'make' but the product was not suggested by, nor predetermined by, the adult. No adult direction whatsoever was given and the children had total freedom in the choice of materials. In this way, the children could shape their own learning.

The artist worked within a team of art specialists who worked in ways that were adventurous and innovative, with a combination of resources to promote engagement with the young child. The children participated at different levels but each child gained an insight into creating something. The signals of engagement highlighted that the children's level of involvement was high (Laevers, 2005).

Both the artist and the children broke boundaries in order to develop their own creativity.

Apart from the provision of resources the physical environment provided opportunities for children to become creative. The environment raised children's levels of curiosity and raised questions. Characters were created and light was used to create an atmosphere for the children.

The physical space available to the children for art, movement and dance was an extended space larger than the nursery environment and this allowed children to take more risks and to experiment with their movements more than they normally would in more constrained, controlled environments. Perhaps the innovative use of space alone will play a huge role in developing children's creativity with the role of the adult being more of an observer of children's needs in relation to space and a provider of such rather than that of a controller of the space. In recent years, the catering for children's creativity in education has been dependent on the adults' own creativity but perhaps we need to start to see it in terms of the adult allowing the child to be creative rather than regulating it.

So what were the important factors in developing the children's creativity?

- A stimulating environment
- Breadth of learning
- Role of resources.

This coincides with Whitehead (1997, p. 65) who identified:

- Meaningful experiences
- Active participators
- Engage in imaginative play
- Feel emotionally secure.

Each principle was interwoven into the performances. As children gain in confidence within the environment and in the more facilitating role of the adult there is reason to believe that their own level of creativity will increase.

The creative processes for the children sometimes were just awe and wonder however at a later time in the day or week the child would revisit the experience in some way and develop their own line of creativity. Parents talked about how the

children re-enacted the performance and added or extracted particular elements in order to make it their own.

The value we put on creativity differs from parent to parent and from teacher to teacher. However, as educators, we must value this and allow children to develop their own creativity.

Children initially have to be engaged, allow time to explore, create and to discuss. For this age group, the planning and creating might simply is the manipulation of the resources.

Another element in the successful engagement of young children in the creative arts is the crucial role of the supporting adults and carers. Professional childcare workers perceive their main role to be as educators of young children however this educational input may actually detract from the child's own creativity and their responses to the stimuli presented to them in creative experiences such as those designed and performed by organisations such as Starcatchers.

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