



The gadget show project

Julie Meiner, Assistant Headteacher, explains how Kings Oak Learning Centre champions the importance of risk taking in developing the skills that children need.

At Kings Oak Primary Learning Centre, we believe that taking risks is a key to ensuring that our children experience a stimulating, meaningful and engaging creative curriculum. This was one of the main priorities when embarking on a Creative Partnerships Change School project in order to embed vision into everyday practice.

All the staff within the learning centre have been involved in identifying the skills that our children need to help them become successful citizens both during their school years and beyond. This culminated in the development of 'The 7 Rs', a combination of the theories of

Alistair Smith and Chris Quigley, that seemed appropriate to the needs of our children. All the skills that our children need to develop in order to become independent learners sat within these seven headings and now form the foundations of our curriculum:

- Responsibility
- Reasoning
- Reflective
- Relationships
- Resilience
- Resourceful
- Risk taking

Risk taking (identified through a Creative Partnerships audit tool) was a key element that we wanted to develop with the staff as well as the children. Many of our teachers and teaching assistants felt that the pressure of targets and SATS meant that creativity was a risky thing to introduce or should be segregated from literacy and numeracy. This led us to the enquiry question:

What is the impact of risk-taking on the staff's confidence in delivering a creative curriculum and on personal, learning and thinking skills in children?

We contracted a digital media company, 'Fowler and Sumner' to work in partnership with our Year 3 and 4 team. This was the start of an exciting and uncertain journey towards a truly creative curriculum with the 7Rs at its heart. Would it work? Would we be sacrificing attainment? Would we have the confidence to do it justice?

'Fowler and Sumner' (Arron and Martin), designed creative activities that encouraged the children to think differently and devise different topic suggestions, then score them according to what they already knew about them and how interesting they seemed and how risky they might be. Once the scores were analysed, the theme of gadgets arose and 'The Gadget Show' was born.

The children then formed separate companies comprising of members from all three classes. They then had to realise the importance of and develop the skills of relationships and team working to allocate roles, devise a name, logo and catchphrase that represented their company.

Once this had been established, they researched gadgets, conducted market research and began to formulate ideas towards gadget design.

As well as inventing and designing their gadgets, each company had to market their products. This included producing podcasts, producing TV adverts and putting together one minute lift pitches. They also designed and made business cards, company T shirts and a visual prototype of their gadget.

The outcome would be a Gadget Show held in school where each company would set up a stand and pitch their product to an audience consisting of parents, members of the community, governors and children from the rest of school. They were given a fictional currency which was

then given to the company who they wanted to back, based on their products, sales pitch and technique.

It was agreed that literacy and numeracy would form part of the project where appropriate but we would not be forcing them where it did not sit naturally. The opportunities for literacy were immediately evident, such as reading and researching, explanations, transcripts, letters and instructions. The challenge was to identify the need for these early so that it allowed time for the skills to be taught beforehand in order to produce quality pieces of work where the quality was not compromised. Numeracy, however, was more of a challenge but still found its place at times. For example, ratio and proportion was taught whilst colour mixing to paint the gadgets.



Observing the children in their companies during the Gadget Show was a privilege, and confirmation that taking the risks paid off. To see a child who can disengage from learning so easily, hiding under tables and refusing to speak, suddenly bursting with confidence showing such pride in their product and pitching to complete strangers was an uplifting experience. The children spoke eloquently and were able to think on their feet, responding professionally to queries and questions.

One of the issues we faced in school was children's lack of ability to listen to each other. They would be so focused on what they wanted to say that all their energy would go into putting their hand up as high as it would go, trying to wave it in front of your face and usually grunting or squeaking as they did so! This in turn would then put off some of our

children from even trying to think about a contribution. We addressed this by introducing offers. This approach was an alternative to hand waving and was a simple outstretched hand as if offering something. This made it very clear to everyone in the class that they were about to comment on something relevant to the conversation and usually built on something that someone had said previously. It took away the desperation and really encouraged the children to listen to each other and develop a conversation or debate instead of making random comments, some of which had already been said, that were always directed at the teacher. It really helped them to value each other's comments and realise that it wasn't just the teacher that they were learning from.

What is a 'Thunk'?

A "Thunk" (Ian Gilbert) is a question that has no right or wrong answer and really makes your brain work a little differently! Take this example:

Can you feel guilty for something you haven't done?
or
If I lose my memory, am I the same person?

'Thunks' were introduced to develop the children's ability to think creatively. Our children saw success as 'getting things right'. We wanted them to recognise the learning in thinking about things differently and seeing things in a different light. This was done very early in the project to encourage them to start thinking creatively and engaging them in a deeper verbal dialogue. By the end of the project, they were able to continue a conversation around a 'Thunk' for a considerable amount of time and again, it was something that all the children engaged fully in because there were no stupid answers and no possible way of getting it wrong. This was something that spread amongst the rest of the staff quickly and are even used at the beginning of staff meetings to stimulate discussion and creative thinking.

What are the benefits of risk-taking?

So did the risk taking pay off? I would say the answer is a resounding "yes". One teacher commented on the close teamwork that developed over the project: "It was good to be out of our comfort zones altogether. By that I mean the teachers, teaching assistants, creative practitioners and the children. It was a learning curve that we all went through together and we all learnt a lot from each other. I learnt that sometimes the children have a better idea than you and that you don't always have the answers."

One of the key changes in the learning and teaching was the realisation that the teacher did not always have to be teaching and the fountain of all knowledge. It was a hard transition to make but relinquishing a little control to the children resulted in great rewards. Some of our teachers were reluctant to teach in an area about which they had very little subject knowledge. Over the course of the project

the Year 3 and 4 teachers were able to model a learning journey to the rest of school that the pupils and teachers went on together. Sometimes the expertise lay with the children, particularly in regard to a lot of the more technical aspects. The children responded well to this and as time went on they learnt to become less reliant on the adults in the room and make decisions for themselves. As teachers saw the impact on the children they began to realise the positive effect that it had on their independence and that facilitating a lesson could be as powerful as teaching a lesson.

We noticed the children taking responsibility for their own learning and outcomes, recognising that they could take their ideas forward and make their own improvements. The less academically able children discovered that they could participate more easily. The lead teacher on the project commented, "These children were more likely to risk take and participate in group and whole class discussions. Some even led discussions amongst the more academically able". As a result these children were suddenly motivated and excited about writing independently, something that was an issue in our setting.

The children's attitude to learning has changed dramatically, particularly that of our less engaged children. Pupil voice and flexible planning allowing for topics to evolve had a part to play in this, but it was real purpose for learning that inspired so many of our children to want to do well and succeed.

As for attainment, it wasn't hindered, but as the children develop the skills within the 7Rs and continue to learn within a meaningful context we hope and expect their attainment to improve in all areas.

What happens next?

Our next steps and the focus of our second year of working with Creative Partnerships is to develop this practice and encourage all of our staff to risk take with the curriculum so that all of our children benefit from similar learning experiences. Instead of contracting creative partners to work with a class, a year group or a team, we want them to focus on the professional development of the whole staff. Peer coaching will play a major role in this, where teachers and teaching assistants will be placed in triads to observe each other's practice and identify next steps for development. The creative practitioner's role will be modelling theory into practice in the classrooms alongside a lead teacher in school with responsibility for the development of creativity. Within a year we hope to see every teacher and teaching assistant risk taking and moving their practice forwards, enabling our children to become confident, independent and successful learners.

We are all passionate about our vision at Kings Oak and want our children to have the same opportunities as children from more privileged backgrounds. Why shouldn't one of our children be Prime Minister in 25 years' time? Who knows, one of them might even invent a gadget that will eradicate global warming!