

How has ArtScapers enriched Mayfield?

We have just completed our fourth year of collaboration with Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination (CCI) on the ArtScapers project. Our curriculum, our staff, our children and their families, have embraced ArtScapers in a way that I longed for, but in reality didn't really expect. This collaboration has intrinsically linked our families to Eddington. The children enthusiastically lead their families to the site and run and find the places and talk about the art they have created there. They talk about newts and teahouses and fields where they threw seeds to make a flower clock. They show off the places where houses for wrens were designed and curated. They are proud of their links to Eddington and talk of the weekend walks they have with their dogs and the fun times they have in the play areas. And I thought that the best way to demonstrate all of this is to share some quotes with you from children and adults and share our story through them.

During the first year of the project Jared, aged 8, said this: *"Being an ArtScaper means to look at something and make your own ideas. Then, just think of the idea you thought of before and mix it up so you can make something even bigger and newer. Then just design it, then just find stuff that might be used in the future and use that to help you build it."*

This early quote hinted at many of the traits so sought after today in our schools - we long for our children to be creative, reflective, adaptive, innovative. Jared told us clearly that ArtScapers could do just that for our young people.

Three years later another group of 8 year olds had this conversation: *"We always have to copy someone else's idea and get our work to look like theirs,"* said William when talking about school.

"When you're an ArtScaper you use your own idea and then show it to others," said Alper.

Tellis went further, *"Actually you show it to yourself too because it helps you to sort out what your own brain is telling you."*

Of course it's the children that give us the biggest insight into their school experience. William's quote is extremely telling and if we take a moment to think about it we can see that it is true. Teachers are constantly modelling the 'right' way to write, the 'right' way to draw, the 'right' way to calculate, and dare I say, the 'right' way to think. The second and third parts of this conversation tell of the power of ArtScapers. The children have identified ArtScapers as a vehicle for their learning. It provides a space for ideas to develop and a theatre and audience to show these ideas to others. It enables thinking. Additional evidence from teachers, teaching assistants and parents corroborates this.

Staff who have accompanied the children have commented on how being an ArtScaper - engaging and interacting with the local and often immediate environment alongside the children, has impacted them as educators. *"Redesigning a site is comparable to redesigning yourself."*

"This is different - a joint thing, everybody's experience is valued...children have learnt loads about themselves and working with friends but it hasn't felt like school and teachers haven't felt like it's teaching."

“It reminds me why I came into teaching in the first place.”

This last comment is also telling - ‘it reminds me why I came into teaching in the first place’. ArtScapers reminds teachers of the qualities and essence of teaching that drew them into the profession. It is the time and space it gives, the working alongside children rather than the practice of talking at or to them, it’s the sense of ‘we’re learning this together, but I’m here to guide and support you through it’.

Parents, who had come along to help, became ArtScapers. The experience led them to go to our school PTA and ask for a whole school ArtScaping day. Only two classes per year were able to go ArtScaping with CCI in years 1 to 3 of the project, and parents wanted the experience for more of our children. This led to a day in March this year when 360 children walked to the Storey’s Field Centre in Eddington for a day of Waves, Arcs and Sparks inspired by the work of Cambridge Scientist Hertha Marks Ayrton. A one minute film summarising this day can be found on the CCI website.

And it’s because of all of these benefits that we decided to take the essence of ArtScapers, as well as the other attributes that CCI brings, to the heart of our two major projects last year at Mayfield: ‘Out and About’ - timetabled time out of the classroom each week for each year group, and ‘Spirals of Enquiry’ - which comes from our work with Whole Education but fits brilliantly with what we’ve learnt from CCI. Although I will focus here on our ‘Out and About’ sessions, the benefits and outcomes of both these initiatives flow into each other. Both are allowing us to get to know our children so much more and, in turn, this is improving the learning opportunities made available to them.

Every child at Mayfield in years 1 to 6 gets an afternoon out of the classroom; we call it ‘Out and About’. This is one of our non-negotiables; i.e. it is expected whatever the weather. Foundation Stage have the opportunity to be outside every day in their own area, but they have also adopted a set time where they take their children further into our grounds, they call this the ‘Welly Walk’. Teachers are encouraged to be brave and experiment with this allocation of time. They are encouraged to not just take a lesson outside that could be taught inside, they are encouraged to do something different, let the children take much more of a lead and work at something that might not be subject or topic based. They are encouraged to observe the children, watch them, and ask themselves what am I learning about these children from being outside that I didn’t know before. We knew this was something that some teachers would find difficult to do, that sense of not being in control every second of the school day. But, and I can’t emphasise this enough, we would not have been able to even contemplate something like this had we not had the experience of working with arts organisations and alongside artists. ArtScapers has been pivotal for us.

Even so the year started with these lessons predictably being tightly planned, intended scripts written with fixed expectations of what was going to happen. As the weeks went on the idea of ‘less is more’

started to come into play; teachers started to realise that having tightly planned lessons was not going to work. When children are outside there are no walls, children move further away and curiosity takes over. It is their natural playground and they can't be 'controlled' like they can inside and neither should they be. Some members of staff felt they needed to know what everyone was doing all of the time, they felt it was their responsibility as 'teacher' to have a presence directly alongside the children. They could see that the children took 'the lesson' in different ways, in directions that could not have been predicted. They took their learning where their interests lay. Staff slowly began to relax and watch the children and start to be amazed that they could do so much more than they thought. The children were surprising them. Some children who find 'traditional lessons' really difficult started to flourish, taking the lead rather than relying on the support of another. Others, at first, found being outside too different from the norm, too unpredictable, too chaotic. But over time, this too started to become part of their routine. Others, whose first language is not English, discovered that they could participate much more fully, expressing themselves through art and gaining confidence in our, unfamiliar to them, setting, thus helping them integrate more quickly.

As the term progressed, the weather turned increasingly cold and wet. Our challenge was to continue to encourage the positive attitudes of the teaching staff toward these sessions. It's easy to go 'Out and About' and be an ArtScaper outside when the weather is warm and dry, but we could sense an impending dread of afternoons when this was not the case. With this in mind we planned our January INSET to be outside and away from school. We asked CCI to deliver 'A Day in the Woods'. We needed teachers to feel what it was like to not only be on the receiving end of an outdoor learning session but to see that, with the right clothing and the right stimulus, a day spent outside, even when it is cold and wet is potentially far more productive and long lasting than another lesson inside. And so Year 4 of our ArtScaper programme began on January 4th with a day in Ashlyn Woods, a piece of woodland south west of Cambridge. Together we spent a day of quiet exploration and reflection in this ancient landscape. Artists Caroline Wendling and Filipa Pereira-Stubbs led a day of thinking together on how to settle and be in this space and what the outdoors can offer our children back at school. Caroline and Filipa shared work and ideas by artists including Nancy Holt, Robert Smithson and Nan Shepherd.

Reflections on the qualities of the day were noted and included: connections with others, calmness, time to be surprised....to settle and feel comfortable, slowing things down and not overplanning, invitation not instruction, feeling more awake and open now (not like our usual training days).

And we came away with the desire to think further about: how to help children be unselfconscious and do their own thing, how the outdoors works so well as a place to get things wrong, how to offer comfort so can be confident and brave, shifting mindset so we can relax even when it's not looking how I expected.

Two terms later we have teachers who are starting to let go, plan much less and relax alongside the children. Expectations of how these sessions go are no longer fixed but expanded. The school grounds seem so much bigger as everyone gets to know them better. The children have adapted to this time more quickly than the adults; their enthusiasm for outdoor learning and ArtScaping is infectious. They comment that they enjoy the space and time to think; *“no one is looking over my shoulder to check, the pressure is less”*. Teachers are no longer worrying about what to specifically plan for these sessions, but instead are saying *‘this lesson needs to happen outside’*. The result being that even more time is spent outdoors in excess of the afternoon allocated.

So what is the impact of all of this? We are into our second year but the feelings are that the well-being of all has improved - both for the adults and the children. There is a genuine excitement from each year group when they know it is ‘Out and About’. There are some children that would prefer not to be part-take for different reasons; some do have additional needs and prefer to take part in learning opportunities that look a particular way. Equally many of our children that do have additional needs, or simply find the classroom and its associated set of ‘rules’ more difficult, much prefer being outside and attain more highly in these situations than they would otherwise. Other children just don’t like being out of doors, including at playtime.

Low level behavioural issues in these sessions has improved as the adults start to trust the children more, and as we see more examples of respect, empathy and kindness being played out by all. At the start some children didn’t quite know how to handle the freedom they had been given, but over time they can see that they are being trusted and have responded accordingly. Children are getting on much more quickly with whoever they are asked to work with; completely different from when we started. Opportunities for everyone to express themselves more creatively has also helped to improve the quality and quantity of writing; children are finding it easier to get started because their ideas are flowing more easily. More work needs to be done to quantify this, but this is a strong thread coming from all teachers.

And what of the future? Children will continue to ArtScape every day, for many these skills are now so embedded that they flow from them without further thought. But Benjamin, who is 9, has really focused our future thinking of where we would love to go next, when he was asked to explain the idea of ArtScaping after a day as ‘an artist in residence’ at the Faculty of Education here in Cambridge. He said this: *“We are the experts and it is much better to be ArtScapers together with someone new to it then they will see and feel what happens... which is much easier than trying to talk about it.”*

Wouldn’t it be great for our children to lead the learning of others, to run training for teachers so that they too can go back into their schools and work in a symbiotic manner with the environment of their locality.

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