When two worlds come together: Young children’s language, literacy and numeracy development through creative, inclusive, theatre methods

RESEARCH REPORT: JULY 2022

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Executive Summary
This report presents the findings of research undertaken by the Open University’s Children’s Research Centre with Chickenshed Theatre Company and 3 schools in the London boroughs of Enfield and Haringey. The 3 year project funded through the charity of Sir Richard Whittington for which the Mercers’ Company is Corporate Trustee. It explores how creative, theatre based workshops can support children’s language literacy and numeracy for children who are on the edges of society. Statistics from the Department for Education state that only 55% of children from deprived backgrounds achieve their learning goals at 5 years old compared to 73% of other children (DfE, 2019). Haringey is the 4th most deprived borough of London, with Enfield in 9th. They both have diverse populations with over 350 languages spoken between them.

The purpose of the funded Chickenshed workshops is to not only support young children’s development and reduce the attainment gap for language, literacy and numeracy, but to instil a curiosity and love for learning through the use of songs, movement, rhymes, and music, assisted by puppets, role play and drama. Key aspects of children’s skills, capabilities, behaviours and wellbeing emerge in early childhood, therefore it is also significant to consider broader experiences of learning and development that the workshops facilitate (Magnuson and Duncan, 2016). Research indicates that it is important that pedagogy, especially for the most vulnerable children remains child-centred, and developmentally appropriate, with an emphasis on play based learning (OCED, 2015). However, the reception baseline assessed when children start school is narrowly focused on maths, literacy and language (DfE, 2020). The Chickenshed workshops aim to incorporate the development of these areas in playful and creative ways through their sessions. This arts based approach where children are empowered to explore and express their preferences and interests provides a platform for holistic development of the child. It is essential that any assessment of children in the early years looks at their development in all areas, and helps to inform educators about what has gone before as well as form a starting point for the future (Archer and Merrick, 2020).

The research followed the implementation of weekly Chickenshed workshops across 3 schools in total. In the first year Chickenshed recruited 2 schools located in Enfield to participate. Unfortunately, the project was disrupted in the second year by the closure of schools because of the global pandemic and one school could no longer continue. This was replaced by another school in neighbouring Haringey and those 2 schools completed the project in July 2022.

The findings were broader than the development of language, literacy and numeracy skills. Themes centred on children’s experiences, teacher and practitioner reflections and learning and development challenges. These were linked to the ways in which children are empowered through their experiences and considered how children participated, had opportunities to be heard and have ownership over their learning space.

The research has resulted in a number of recommendations recognising that theatre has a place in education and education has a place in theatre. The foundations that the project has started to build means that there is potential for work to continue on the transferability of Chickenshed workshop activities into the main teaching environment; to acknowledge the significance of children’s different experiences from home, school, and their community; and to recognise the significance of empowering children in playful interactions to support their learning and development in transferable life skills.
There is still work to be done in theatre based education understanding the requirements of the Early Years Foundation Stage and mapping their work to those requirements. However this research demonstrates that there is a place for creative, inclusive theatre methods in early years education and beyond. The coming together of schools and Chickenshed has been a positive collaboration, developing new ways of working and perspectives in approaches to supporting young children’s learning. Schools see the links, benefits and potential of the Chickenshed workshops for the continuation of practice and teaching.
Introduction
This report sets out the context, methods, findings and recommendations from the Chickenshed Theatre Company 3 year funded project. The research explored the impact of creative, inclusive theatre methods on pre-school children’s language, literacy and numeracy. It included three schools in the London boroughs of Haringey and Enfield and children aged between 2 and 4 years old. Methods included workshop observations at the three schools in outdoor and indoor environments; large and small groups; with and without parents in attendance. Stay and play and classroom sessions were also observed. Interviews and focus groups were conducted with parents, teachers and practitioners, lead educators and Chickenshed performers.

The 3 years (September 2019 - July 2022) included school closures due to the COVID pandemic which resulted in creative responses through Tales TV and activity cards being utilised by children and families in their home environment. Findings were organised into themes and mapped against the empowerment framework (Canning, 2020). The data reveals the rich and diverse nature of learning, development and engagement through children’s participation, voice and ownership. Consequently there has been a strong foundation built between the schools and Chickenshed resulting in a sharing of ways of working and developing practice within schools and in theatre based education. Children’s experiences through the workshops have been enriched by the imaginative and creative ways in which resources and the environment has been utilised. The involvement for children in the workshops has demonstrated the value of playful interactions, contributing to positive engagement with learning and development in the areas of language, literacy and numeracy.

Children’s active engagement in playful situations supports their cognitive and physical development as they bring what they already know to a situation and build on or experiment with their knowledge (Canning et al, 2017). Children also come to playful situations with experiences from home, their family, and community (Keung and Cheung, 2019). Children use those experiences to make sense of what is happening around them and figure out ways in which they can contribute and participate. Observing playful participation is a way of listening to children through what they do, who they interact with and the different ways they get involved with what is happening around them. Children enter each new experience with an emotional response as to what is happening around them as well as a physical one. Consequently, the way in which children choose to participate can indicate how they are feeling and what they want out of the experience.

Through encouraging playful participation in the workshops the Chickenshed performers offered different experiences. Children were encouraged to show and share their interests about the subjects, songs and stories being introduced and the colourful; child friendly resources such as puppets and materials complimented the narrative of the sessions. The combination of the resources and performers creating imaginative and creative worlds also influenced how children acted and engaged within the workshops.

The Open University: Children’s Research Centre
The Children’s Research Centre promotes research for children, by children and with children. We empower children and young people’s voices through engaging in projects which centre on children’s interests and wellbeing.
Established in 2004 our work is carried out in consultation and collaboration with a vibrant and
diverse community of stakeholders: Children and young people, parents, teachers, policymakers,
researchers and other organisations which have child-centred philosophies.

The CRC:
- Challenges views about children’s ability to take part and inform research processes
- Facilitates children’s voices so they are heard and taken seriously; where their ideas are not
  mediated or edited
- Empowers children’s thoughts and ideas to make a difference to them and for them
- Informs new developments in policy and practice to improve children’s lives and education

The CRC enables those interested in researching with and about children and young people an arena
to join with like-minded individuals and organisations. We support children as researchers around
topics important to them. We collaborate with partners who share the same aspirations for children
and young people.

Chickenshed Theatre Company
Chickenshed is an inclusive theatre company that first began in 1974. Primarily based at our own
purpose-built venue in North London, we create theatre for all ages and run successful outreach
projects, education courses and membership programmes throughout the year. We are a registered
charity and rely heavily on the generous support of individuals, companies, trusts and foundations in
order to continue our pioneering work.

Chickenshed changes lives by bringing young people from all social and economic backgrounds,
cultures and abilities together to study creatively alongside each other, many of whom have been
marginalised by society and excluded from mainstream educational settings. We hold weekly
workshops for over 900 children and young people - providing them with a safe and rewarding
environment where they can gain a new-found confidence and have the chance to regularly perform
in major in-house productions.

Chickenshed has established a network of partners that enables us to effectively target children and
young people who would otherwise not be able to access our work. We regularly take our inclusive
outreach model on the road, delivering over 15 projects and benefiting over 15,000 young people
every year in venues ranging from primary schools and young offender centres, to mainstream and
special schools. Our work engages and educates young people about relevant social issues through
the power of performance and active participation in workshops.

Context
This section provides an overview of the context of the participating schools and where they are
located. It highlights the statistics relating to population, education and socio-economic status of
the two London boroughs which is significant in the context of Early Years language, literacy and
numeracy learning and development for the children in the project.

Carterhatch Infant and Children’s Centre
Situated in the London borough of Enfield Carterhatch promotes stimulated learning through indoor
and outdoor environments including a wide range of activities and provision that are planned and
delivered by teachers and support staff. Running through early years is the principle of learning through play, as the most meaningful way for young children to learn. Offering open ended learning experiences, the structure of the day includes extended periods of uninterrupted play, so that children can get deeply involved in their own learning. Children can access resources by themselves, make choices, follow their own interests and extend their own learning independently. This all leads to greater involvement, independence and deeper learning.

**Alma Primary School**

Alma Primary is also situated in the London borough of Enfield. Offering nursery for 2 and 3 year olds they stimulate and encourage children’s development, establishing a love of learning within a safe and secure environment. Children learn through play with a combination of child initiated and teacher led learning opportunities both indoors and in our amazing outdoor areas. Children are observed during play in order to assess their stage of development and in order to plan for their next steps and their future learning.

**Rowland Hill Nursery School and Children’s Centre**

Rowland Hill is situated in the London borough of Haringey. The school promotes individual learning from a basis of children developing and learning at different rates. The impact of the curriculum and planning in the moment ensures that children learn key skills, and have knowledge and dispositions at different points in their learning journey. Through child initiated play children explore and develop learning experiences which help them make sense of the world. They have the opportunity to think creatively alongside other children and adults as well as on their own. As children develop their confidence they learn to make decision and it provides them with a sense ownership over their learning and development.

**Haringey**

Rowland Hill Nursery School and Children’s Centre is located in the London borough of Haringey which is a highly diverse borough. 38% of residents are from BAME groups and 26% identify as “white other”. Over 180 languages are spoken and 30% of residents do not speak English as their main language. Of those whose main language is not English, one in four (24%) either do not speak English well or do not speak it at all.

Haringey is ranked 49 out of the 317 local authorities in England with respect to deprivation, and is the 4th most deprived in London. In 2018/19, 74.6% of 5 year olds in Haringey were reaching a ‘good level of development’ at the end of reception, similar to the London average (74.1%) and the proportion of 5 year olds reaching a good level of development has increased over time.

(Information taken from Haringey at a Glance: State of the borough, 2022)

**Enfield**

Carterhatch Infant and Children’s Centre and Alma Primary School are located in the neighbouring borough of Enfield. 35% of residents were estimated to have been born overseas. Of those residents born outside the UK, 12% were from outside Europe and Asia, with the largest group (9.1% of all residents) being from sub-Saharan Africa. It is estimated that approximately 11% of residents are from European Union countries.
Over ninety languages are spoken as a main or only language, with the most widely spoken being English, followed by Turkish, Polish, Greek and Somali. Among schoolchildren, 80% speak English as a first language although 189 languages or dialects have been recorded. Only just over half of pupils in Enfield’s state schools have English as a first language, a lower percentage than in the London region, and significantly lower than the average for England. Indeed, among primary school children, the majority have a first language believed to be other than English.

Enfield is the 5th largest London borough by population, but is the 9th most deprived. Nearly one-fifth of children (under 16) are from low income families. 69.7% of children under 5 years old achieved a ‘good level of development’, which is slightly lower than the England average of 71.8%, but 68.6% of pupils achieved at least the expected level across all Early Learning Goals.

(Information taken from Enfield Borough Profile, 2021)

**The Research Project**

The project centred on children’s engagement with the Chickenshed workshops and asked the question:

**What impact does creative inclusive theatre methods have on the attainment gap for preschool children focusing upon language, literacy and numeracy?**

The research focused on children’s playful participation in the workshops, and how performers and practitioners supported children during sessions. Particular attention was paid to the way in which language, literacy and numeracy was introduced into songs, actions and imaginative scenarios.

**Research approach**

The research generated data through a Mosaic approach combining reflections on a range of ways to listen to children, and to understand their experiences through different methods and observations (Clark et al., 2011). Each element of the Mosaic approach is valued and recognised as making a significant contribution to knowledge generation about children and the things that matter to them. Central to this is listening which is an ‘active process, involving, interpreting, constructing meaning and responding’ (Clark, 2017: 26). Researchers worked with information gathered from multiple sources; parents, teachers, performers; workshops and play observations. The data generated enabled a picture of children’s engagement to emerge, where important features of the Chickenshed workshops became prominent.

*The Mosaic approach is a way of listening that acknowledges children and adults as co-constructors of meaning. It is an integrated approach which combines the visual with the verbal...”* (Clark and Moss, 2011, p. 1)

Through the process of engaging with a Mosaic approach the following questions were key in keeping a focus on the experiences of children playfully participating within the workshops:

- How are children showing their interest and preferences?
- What is it like to be here for a child?
- What information are children conveying through what they say/don’t say, their body language or gesture?
• How do children let other people know what they are thinking and feeling?

**Data generation methods**

The main data generation methods over the 3 year project were based on:

• Observational field notes (Chickenshed workshops and ‘Stay and Play’ sessions, training sessions between schools and Chickenshed performers on documenting the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS))

• Interviews (parents, Lead educators, Early Childhood practitioners and teachers, Chickenshed performers)

• Reflections (Lead educators, Early Childhood practitioners and teachers, Chickenshed performers)

**Table 1: Summary of data generation at the 3 schools**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Carterhatch</th>
<th>Alma</th>
<th>Rowland Hill</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chickenshed Workshop observations</td>
<td>Yr1</td>
<td>Yr1,3</td>
<td>Yr3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stay and Play observations</td>
<td>Yr1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom observations</td>
<td>Yr1,3</td>
<td>Yr3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lead educator interviews</td>
<td>Yr1</td>
<td>Yr1,3</td>
<td>Yr3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Years practitioners/teacher interviews</td>
<td>Yr1</td>
<td>Yr1,3</td>
<td>Yr3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent interviews and/or focus groups</td>
<td>Yr1</td>
<td>Yr1,3</td>
<td>Yr3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection focus groups with teachers/</td>
<td>Yr1</td>
<td>Yr1,3</td>
<td>Yr3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>practitioners/lead educators</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The information below details the range of data generated through each year of the project.

**Year 1 (September 2019 – July 2020)**

**Table 2: Year 1 data generation for Carterhatch and Alma Schools**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Looking for examples of…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Observations of children in the Chickenshed</td>
<td>• Children’s engagement with the songs and when they</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>school-based workshops (2 &amp; 3 year old</td>
<td>copy performers actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>children)</td>
<td>• Where children are positioning themselves within the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>workshop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• How children are interacting with performers, other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>children and parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews with parents</td>
<td>• Use of workshop content in the home environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Children’s preferences – comparison between home and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>workshops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations of ‘stay and play’ sessions</td>
<td>• Use of workshop content in other play situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>at Carterhatch (2 &amp; 3 year old children)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher/practitioner interviews</td>
<td>• Impact of workshops on children’s development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(language, literacy, numeracy)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In term 2, year 1 (March 2020) schools were closed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently term 3 workshops and observations did not take place. This was an uncertain time for schools and staff as they concentrated on setting up new ways of working for the education and welfare of their students.

**Year 2 (September 2020 – July 2021)**
It was hoped that by the beginning of year 2 that schools would have returned to face to face teaching. However, this did not materialise. Chickenshed and the schools worked creatively to provide children with online content and engagement.

**Interactive workshops**
The majority of the programme was paused due to lockdown in England and restrictions in place for schools. Chickenshed delivered regular online live workshops to children in 2 venues throughout the term. One school had regular bespoke ‘Tales’ episodes made for them based on the topics they were doing in class. These were extremely successful both in terms of attendance, in fact one school stated that they had more attendance and feedback than for their own online classes.

**Product Development**
Tales TV episodes were created and shared with schools, and have had a wider reach to other early years groups and Children’s Centres.

A new tool was developed and created in the form of activity cards representing the ‘blur’ characters and contain child friendly information around colours, number and rhyme.

**Summer Term 2021**
By the summer term, Chickenshed and schools had become used to providing children with a hybrid of support through online ‘Tales TV’ and activity packs. Alma Primary hand delivered creative parcels to their Early Years children which contained paper, glue, scissors, coloured pens and pencils with ideas for making and creating. The youngest children in some households were overlooked as attention and digital time was prioritised for older siblings. The packs gave the youngest children something to call their own and mitigated against disadvantage by providing resources.

**Year 3 (September 2021 – July 2022)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Looking for examples of:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Observations of children in the Chickenshed school-based workshops (2 & 3 year old children) | - Children’s engagement and inclusion in the workshops (e.g. wanting to join in with singing, counting, signing, on their own/with other children/with other adults)  
- Children’s empowerment in the workshops (e.g. participation, ownership and voice) |
| Observations of children’s play | - Repeated patterns of Chickenshed workshop |
in a different context (e.g. EY classrooms, playground) | actions/songs. Adapted or personalised aspects of workshops for individual or groups of children
- Amount of workshop influence woven into other types of play.

Interviews and focus groups with teachers/practitioners/lead educators | Benefits and challenges of workshops for children’s learning and development with focus on language, literacy and numeracy.
- Transferable skills
- Links to curriculum

Interviews with parents | Children’s play preferences
- Changes in play since attending workshops.
- Different ways of supporting their child.

**Ethics**
Ethical considerations included the need to ensure processes that provided for young children’s ease, familiarity and comfort in order to enable their full participation in the workshops. Therefore the workshops were initially introduced by the Early Years teachers and performers. The workshops were held on the same day at the same time each week and therefore became a regular feature of the children’s routine. The OU research team was introduced to the children and parents at each session they observed. The schools sourced the parents and teachers/practitioners to participate in interviews and reflections. Alongside adhering to the British Educational Research Association (BERA) guidelines (2018) schools and teachers consented through a signed form, and had the opportunity to withdraw from the research before a set date. Permission was sought to name the schools in this report.

**Data analysis**
Thematic analysis was used for data interrogation (Braun & Clarke, 2021). From the observations, interviews and reflections, a systematic review was conducted identifying patterns of reoccurring words and topics relating to children’s engagement, language, literacy and numeracy. These were identified as the codes. From the codes themes were identified (table 4). Themes were then analysed against the empowerment framework (Canning, 2020) which identifies ways in which children can be empowered through their experiences (figure 1). This mode of analysis enabled the findings to be considered in a broader learning context.

**Key findings: Themes**
The main findings from the data show that the workshops support children’s enjoyment, participation and involvement. In table 4 the codes and themes emerging from the data are detailed and grouped into child focused, teacher/practitioner focused and learning and development.

**Table 4: Codes and themes from the data**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grouped as child focused themes (C)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Holistic approach to supporting children’s language, literacy, numeracy** | ● Including all children in the workshops  
● Repetition of songs including number |
through the workshops

- Familiarity of routine

**Creative** approaches to including all children – following the child’s interests

- Questions to children; acting on children’s responses
- Use of environment
- Imagination of children
- Stories/possibilities of blur characters
- Flexibility within songs to follow children’s suggestions

Focus on **children’s experiences** – narrative, lived experiences, exposure to the arts

- Colourful puppets
- Open ended resources – foil and scarfs
- Music
- Movement
- Expression through the body

**Grouped as teacher/practitioner focused themes (T/P)**

**COVID** impact – schools response, workshops online

- Change of focus - teaching and learning
- Utilising online platforms
- Digital poverty
- Online ‘live’ parameters

**Different ways of working** with children – performance aspect of the workshops

- Communication
- Engagement online
- Blur puppets in empty classrooms

**Linking** workshop content (songs, movement) to everyday practice

- Familiarity of workshop content into everyday practice
- Spontaneous inclusion of workshop content into other contexts
- Repetition – catchy tunes
- Transfer of resources – scarfs, puppets, activity cards

Inclusion of **extended family** members

- New experiences – theatre visits
- Memory of past Chickenshed experiences
- Encouraged participation and invitation
- Community
- Positive experiences – enjoyment for all ages

**Grouped as learning and development themes (LD)**

**Exchange of ideas** between performers and school staff to link into curriculum

- Establishing shared meaning and understanding
- Openness for learning and development
- Fit and links into existing curriculums
- Underpinning knowledge and understanding
Understanding the **impact of arts education** for practitioners and children/families

- Enrichment of children’s/families experiences
- Learning through experience
- Shared interests and conversations
- Creating memories
- Value of performance

Integration of the awareness of children’s learning in supporting the development and **sustainability of workshops**

- Process vs. outcome
- Indicators of learning
- Recognition of different skills and transferability of skills

The layered element created through the mosaic approach to the research enables the themes in table 4 to be considered against the empowerment framework which focuses on children’s empowering experiences and the way in which they support children’s curiosity and interest in subjects and the world around them. Consequently, there is added value in analysing the research question which considers language, literacy and numeracy learning and development within creative, inclusive theatre methods through the empowerment framework.

**Empowerment Framework**

The empowerment framework is a tool for capturing children’s involvement in their play environment and with their peers. It exposes what they are interested in and how they are learning through that process. It is based on three guiding themes, participation, voice and ownership which are significant in contributing to empowering experiences. Empowerment is a fundamental quality that most individuals desire. It is complex because people do not feel empowered all of the time, it is a process; a feeling, and requires certain elements to be in place for empowering experiences to occur. Empowerment in children’s play follows the same argument in that it is not one single action, event or circumstance. It is concerned with examining individual choices and decisions based on social interactions, emotional responses and environmental influences within situated boundaries and resources. However, participation, voice and ownership are essential components that contribute to children’s experiences of empowerment. The research question is concerned with the attainment gap for children’s language, literacy and numeracy. The research findings cannot provide quantitative data on the Chickenshed workshops closing that gap, but what they can do is show the way in which workshop experiences contribute to children’s empowerment, which fuels children’s desire to engage in learning.
In figure 2 the key themes from the findings are mapped against the empowerment framework. This demonstrates the way in which the findings link to children’s empowerment, engagement and involvement.

The analysis of the themes to the empowerment framework enables the context of the findings from observations, interviews and focus groups to be considered in understanding the value and significance of the workshops. In the next section, key findings are supported with discussion focused upon the drivers for the project: Language, literacy and numeracy as well as the drivers for the empowerment framework: participation, voice and ownership.
**Key Findings: Language and Literacy**

Early development of language, literacy and communication is part of children’s everyday interactions. Children hear and listen to conversations around them, they begin to recognise pitch and tone of voices of those closest to them; they see facial expressions, gesture and body language. Children are stimulated by the world around them, text, pictures, colour and sounds. They respond to repetition of songs and rhymes, and as they grow older enjoy the telling and retelling of stories (Broadman, 2021). This is supported by parents interviewed about the project. A parent from Carterhatch commented:

*She repeats songs at home, she does nursery rhymes, rainbow song and role play with puppets and teddies with her brother aged 6. She never sits next to me during the workshops, she loves it!* (Interview: parent of a 30 month old, Carterhatch, Year 1, Term 2, February 2020).

The Chickenshed workshops encourage communication in the sessions, talking to children, asking them about what they like, what they remember from last time and adding movements to match the words they are saying, signing or singing.

*Some weeks they say, ‘we are doing XYZ, is that ok, does it fit in?’ and at the end they say, ‘is there something you want us to do next week?’ They always make it fit. There was one child’s birthday and she loves unicorns and I asked them to sing her ‘happy birthday’, but they based it around unicorns and made the song and actions personal to her and her love of unicorns - that was lovely* (Interview: Lead Educator Carterhatch, Year 1, Term 1, October 2019).

The performers also leave familiar sentences unfinished, encouraging children to fill in the blanks and remember what they did in the previous session. This enables young children to develop receptive language – the ability to understand others. The connections children make with sounds and visual aids, in this case the ‘blur’ puppets are important first steps towards early reading skills (Goouch and Lambirth, 2016).

*The activity cards with the blur characters are really good because the performers are using them in the sessions. The children can look at them again during nursery if they want to and we can give them to the parents to do the activities at home. The performers make the cards come alive because they are acting out the blur characters, thinking like them, making the children laugh and give their opinion about what they like and don’t like about the blurs. It holds their interest and when they come back to the cards at nursery or at home they remember that and want to replicate the fun they had with them, but of course as well as this they are also learning about letters and sounds without realising it* (Interview: Teacher, Alma, Year 3, Term 2, February 2022).

The repetition of rhyme and song in the workshops help children remember new words. The association of the words with the workshops support teachers and practitioners with cross over links between what they are doing and learning in the nursery/classroom and what children enjoy doing at the Chickenshed workshops (DfE, 2022). Alliteration, (for example ‘the magic we make’) and assonance (resemblance of sounds between vowels or consonants, for example, ‘reach up high, right
up to the sky’) in the Chickenshed songs draws attention to individual sounds and patterns in words that support children’s recognition and repetition of words and sentences.

The little green frog song is great for developing children’s language because of the familiar and repetitive tune. I have one child who is constantly singing it at nursery; he knows all the words and signs and can make it his own by choosing what he puts in the song. For a little boy who is very shy and won’t communicate verbally unless he absolutely has to, this song has been a game changer. That’s how the workshops have helped with language development here (Focus group: Practitioner, Rowland Hill, Year 3, Term 1, October, 2021).

Young children are adept at interpreting visual texts and noticing detail. The ‘blur’ puppets support making connections between colour and words and the activity cards mirror the puppets’ personalities. The stories with each of the ‘blur’ puppets help children to understand sequence and further develop comprehension. Alongside all of the storytelling, songs and music, children are taught the sign language for each word. Therefore children who are pre-verbal or lack confidence in speaking can be included in the workshops through the actions and signing. The Chickenshed performers add exaggerated facial expressions to emphasise and engage with individual children who might be on the periphery of the group.

The ‘mirror, mirror’ song starts and Isaac is interested in being in the mirror ‘frame’ [a hula hoop], making a funny face when he has a turn. Once he has had a turn, he runs to where he thinks the performer is going next, joins the group of children so he can have another go. All of the time the ‘mirror, mirror’ song is playing and the performers are singing and signing the words so children can see, hear and participate if they wish (Researcher observation: Carterhatch, Year 1, Term 1, October 2019).

Key findings: Participation

Participation in the context of this research is about children being able to make choices and decisions and having the opportunity to be curious and explore. The workshops support children’s participation because there is not a set level of engagement expected. Children can be up close and personal with the puppets and performers, sit with their parent or be on the edge of what is happening. Performers in the larger workshops spread themselves around the room so that if a child finds the lead performer too much, they can engage with a performer they feel more comfortable with. This supports the theme of a holistic approach to the workshops so that children through their interest in what is happening can be open to learning about language, literacy and numeracy. Enabling levels of participation in a relaxed structure also supports an individualised approach, for example, a parent whose child had experienced long stays in hospital and was at first reluctant to join in, now actively wants to participate:

My daughter’s favourite bit is the stretching. She is a big child and a bit lazy, so it’s good she’s stretching. She was really scared of teddies, since being at Great Ormond Street Hospital when she was a baby, so she used to scream when she saw a teddy or a puppet but Pete (Chickenshed) did a nice thing where he helped her; showed her the puppet slowly, let her hold it and now she’s fine with them. She really didn’t like them at first (Interview: parent of a 36 month old, Carterhatch, Year 1, Term 2, February 2020).
This process enabled the child to have a new experience which facilitated a change in perception about puppets. Her participation stimulated a process of empowerment because now the motivation to join in the workshops comes from the child and is sustained for as long as her interest remains active. When children have choice and can decide their level of participation, teachers find out more about their personalities and preferences.

The children that I thought would be really extrovert weren’t, they were really shy and one of them that is really into sports and boy games has come out and said that he likes cheerleading, dancing and performing. He probably doesn’t get to do that at home because although he has older sisters, mum really wanted a boy so he gets to do boy things at home. I think he was embarrassed that he enjoyed doing the same things as his sisters. We have encouraged him and said, ‘of course you can dance, why wouldn’t you?’ and he has said, ‘well that’s my sisters thing, but I really like it’. So having that opportunity to throw scarves in the air and dance around has been really good for him and I don’t think he would have come out of himself so much if he hadn’t had the Chickenshed opportunity (Interview: Teacher, Carterhatch, Year 1, Term 1, November 2019).

This example links to the theme of different ways of working as the performance element of the workshops encouraged the child to express themselves. The workshop enabled him to do this; celebrating his choices and positively encouraging him to express himself in an inclusive space. This also links to empowerment because participation is also about investing in social interactions with others and risking an emotional investment in caring about what is going on and wanting to be part of that situation.

When we first took the class into the workshops we had preconceptions about what the children would be like; with strangers especially because they were men. But they surprised us – even the way they engaged was completely different. Now we know them a bit better [Chickenshed] and we have seen them do their thing it is easier to reflect and see how the children engage. I thought one child would be cautious of the men because of his experiences at home, but he really engaged, maybe because they were acting and having fun. He now loves the men, I was quite surprised by that (Interview: Teacher, Carterhatch Year 1, Term 2, February 2020).

From this quote, it can be seen that children’s experiences at home and in their community influence their participation. Significant people including extended family members effect how children respond and interact in more immersive experiences. This theme is influential in enabling children to access new opportunities. This is captured by the Early Years coordinator at Alma:

I can tell you now categorically that the children when they come into our provision make phenomenal progress. Because they come in so low, and they don’t have the interaction, they don’t have the experiences at home that we are then offering them, so of course as soon as they start to have those experiences they fly. (Interview: Early Years Coordinator, Alma, Year 3, Term 2, March 2022)

**Key findings: Numeracy**
Children learn about number and mathematics through a wide variety of play experiences which do not focus on these subjects. Shapes and patterns, quantities, volume and weight are all significant in the way children develop understanding about numeracy in an engaging context. The workshops use numeracy throughout the sessions. Songs and movement that count up to 10, support children making connections with sequence, coupled with actions and a memorable melody and the repetition of the song at the beginning of each workshop aids familiarity and learning. Songs and movement also involve making patterns through facial expression and copying what others are doing. Actions that require children to ‘reach up high to the sky and low to the ground’ are the beginnings of mathematics. In the workshops children are engaging with numeracy without realising, and because it is integrated into songs, music and movement where children are focused, children grasp the meaning which support transferable skills at a later stage in their learning (Cooper, ND).

One week we were struggling to get the children to count to 20 so I asked Chickenshed to do more number work in their workshop and then I saw the children really engage. Asking Chickenshed to model how to incorporate number into a more creative, performance based way has really helped the children to learn. They remember it [numbers] better through song. That’s also helped me think about how I can be more creative in the classroom because I get self-conscious so didn’t really like singing, but I’ve realised the children don’t care (Interview: Teacher, Carterhatch, Year 1, Term 1, November 2019).

In the literature discussing language, literacy and numeracy there is emphasis on embedding teaching and learning that encourages young children to become confident, competent and curious through learning that engages children and captures their imagination (Archer and Merrick, 2020; Children’s Commissioner, 2020).

We have tried to make links between what we do [theatre performance] with the curriculum the school has to follow. Knowing more about this has helped us refine and focus the workshops over the 3 years. We definitely know more now about the curriculum and how we can tailor our sessions to the school’s needs (Interview: Chickenshed performer, Year 3, Term 2, April 2022).

The workshops demonstrate to children different ways in which they can express themselves. Intertwined with this is the focus on language, literacy and numeracy, creating an environment where children are encouraged to have a go, become involved in the songs and movement, interact with the puppets and express their opinions about their immediate experiences of the workshops.

**Key findings: Voice**

Children’s voice in this context is linked to how children choose to express themselves within the workshops and the impact this has on other children engaged in the same songs and movements in the same space. There is a structure to the workshops, but within that children have opportunities to express their interests:

The performers are working with a smaller group of children inside the nursery at Alma. The majority of children are sitting in a circle, listening to the story that the performer is acting out with the aid of puppets. One child is upset. Despite efforts from the staff, he does not
want to sit down and join in. He is wandering around the construction area, looking tearful. One of the performers goes over to him and picks up some of the building blocks. He puts them on the table. The child knocks the block off the table. The performer puts another block on the table and the child repeats knocking it to the floor. This process continues whilst the workshop activities continue (Researcher observation: Alma, Year 3, Term 1, November 2021).

The child is expressing his voice in not wanting to participate in the workshop activities. He is doing this through his body language in standing and walking around and separating himself from the group. He is determined because he refuses several attempts by staff and performers to join in with the workshop activity. There is interconnectedness between children’s voice and participation. Here the child does not want to participate in the workshop and is expressing this through his movement away from the group. The performer provides him with a different focus which he becomes interested in and wants to become involved in. The exchange between the two is tentative at first, but evolves into more confident and concentrated actions of knocking the blocks from the table one by one. In the workshops children have a choice in what they do as well as what they choose not to do which demonstrates to other children their preferences and how strongly they feel about them (Pramling Samuelsson and Fleer, 2008).

The exchange between the child and the performer demonstrates how the flexibility of the performer enabled the child to express himself and his preferences. The compromise that the performer made in working on a one to one basis with the child meant that everyone involved achieved a sense of satisfaction. This relates to the process of empowerment as part of children experiencing and building social relationships, being involved, having ideas affirmed or ignored, and building capacity to be adaptable and flexible in a play situation. It was interesting for the teachers and practitioners to observe the interaction as they know the personality of the child and could make links to everyday practice:

This child is particularly vulnerable so it was interesting to see how he reacted when he was in a one to one situation with a relative stranger [Chickenshed performer]. I think because he was in charge and could decide when to walk away and how hard to knock the blocks off the table; and because the performer mirrored his actions rather than trying to dictate what he did made a difference to how he felt about the exchange. At the end you could see he was really immersed in what he was doing (Focus group: Practitioner, Alma, Year 3, Term 1, November 2021).

The way in which the workshops link with everyday practice in the schools is significant for the teachers and practitioners. The exchange of knowledge between the practitioners and performers has been largely informal through the project but is a significant theme underpinning the motivation to learn from each other. Although children and parents might see the workshops as weekly stand-alone events, they are contributing to children’s lived experiences, exposing them to different ways to express themselves, learning new skills such as signing and interacting in creative and imaginative ways. The professional areas (education and theatre) are different, yet have many complimentary principles such as flexibility to adapt and learn, collaborative ways of working and being creative thinkers. These skills underpin Early Years practice and dovetail with theatre performance.
Consequently, building on the commonalities between education and theatre will ultimately ensure that in the long term, these types of workshops remain sustainable.

In everyday practice, for teachers and practitioners a balance is maintained between children’s voice and the structure/routine of the day. The workshops have enabled children to have a voice within a different type of structure which has opened up possibilities for seeing different ways of working. The research was interested to know what the difference is between Early Years practice and Chickenshed performance. The question and subsequent answer in the focus groups at the end of the project indicated the core motivation for the research and the impact for learning:

What is it that Chickenshed do that makes a difference to you and the children who take part?

For me it is the immediate creative response when a child does something unplanned or not within the structure of the session. The performers are quick to change what they are doing, and do it in a playful way so that the child is following their interests, but the performer is offering different ideas and options. We try to do that in our practice as well, but we are not so successful...probably because we are not so adept at improvising and are constantly thinking about ‘proving’ children’s learning rather than just letting it happen in a natural way. It’s not that we don’t let children play and have enriching experiences through play, but as practitioners we feel the pressure to record and justify what we are doing. I guess the performers are free from that (Focus group: Practitioner, Rowland Hill, Year 3, Term 2, January 2022).

The Chickenshed performers have modelled how role play can be taken forward and because we have seen that, we have tried it in the classroom to help children’s learning (Interview: Teacher, Carterhatch, Year 1, Term 1, November 2019).

We have always tried to be creative in our practice and have done most of the things that Chickenshed do in their workshops, but it is concentrated in the workshops so it is more of an event which the children like. Quite a lot of the staff have seen or done Chickenshed before, so it’s not new to us, the songs and the instruments and we love all of that stuff but it has helped us with new ideas for the nursery. We can also see which children are most interested in each type of activity which has helped us to be able to stand back and observe and then try and tailor some activities for individual children that we have seen have showed a particular interest in something (Telephone interview: Lead Educator, Alma, Year 1, Term 1, December 2019).

In the second year of the project, the global pandemic, COVID-19 meant schools closed and the project was on-hold until alternative learning arrangements could be thought through and implemented. Although the fear was that children’s voice would become lost Chickenshed responded creatively to make links between home and school. They made online videos of the ‘blur’ puppets visiting empty classrooms, and continued the workshops bringing the schools together through ‘Tales TV’. There was a demand on parents to meet the expectations of online learning, especially when there were older siblings in the house and there was a lack of technology available.
The schools all responded differently to supporting their children through this challenging time. Alma as outlined in the data generation section provided creative packs for their youngest children, whilst Rowland Hill endeavoured to remain open as much as possible with staggered opening, outdoor classrooms and restrictions on the number of children. The bespoke provision provided by Chickenshed enabled children to feel a sense of ownership when they engaged with the online sessions; it was something just for them. The sense of belonging and identity linked to the schools and to the Chickenshed workshops was a lifeline to many families:

Lockdown was very stressful for us. I have 4 children and live in a small flat, so it felt like chaos every day. Trying to get the oldest ones to do schoolwork and entertaining the youngest ones was a hard juggling act and very stressful. My youngest missed nursery so to see the puppets in the school made him laugh and want to interact with the online sessions. We could also watch them back whenever he wanted to. Being in nursery makes him happy, he has friends and does fun things so he really missed that. I’m so grateful to be back here, being able to meet with other parents, it makes me feel better that it wasn’t just me struggling (Focus group: Parent, Rowland Hill, Year 3, Term 1, February 2022).

Teachers have also seen a difference in children pre and post lockdown. They reported:

Because some children were getting limited interaction with their family during lockdown we have seen children come back to school with reduced communication skills and vocabulary and signs of anxiety when encountering larger groups of children and adults. We are working hard to reassure children and build back their confidence. This is when we have needed the Chickenshed workshops more than ever. We pride ourselves in supporting our local community and doing the best we can for our families, but it has been so hard, especially when staff have had COVID as well and been very poorly (Interview: Early Years Coordinator, Alma, Year 3, Term 1, March 2022).

The sense of community and helping children to feel that they belong to something more than their immediate and extended family members is an important aspect for all of the schools in the research. This links into the final key finding of ownership.

**Key findings: Ownership**

When children feel they have control or ownership of something, it helps them feel secure and confident in what they are doing. The workshops provided this through the familiarity of structure, songs and movement on a weekly basis. The children became confident in participating, knowledgeable in what was going to happen next and developed a sense of security in the routine of the sessions. Within that routine, there was also flexibility with different puppets making an appearance or sessions tailored to the environment. Most of the workshops post-lockdown were conducted outside at Rowland Hill and the trees and playground provided hiding spaces for the puppets. The confidence of the children in the content of the workshops (knowing what was coming next) coupled with the familiarity of the environment, gave the children a sense of ownership. Yet, there was also a sense of excitement because the context of the environment was being used in a different way. The mix of creativity and assurance alongside the relationships the children had built with the core performers is powerful in maintaining a sense of ownership.
We try not to tell the children what to do. We want them to be part of the experience. The music leads the different activities. When the music changes, the activity changes. When we want to do something calming, the music is softer, slower (Interview: Chickenshed performer, Year 3, Term 1, November 2021).

Ownership is not always physical ownership of an object, but it is also ownership of an emotion or memory. The funding from the project has enabled Chickenshed to give free tickets to Chickenshed performances at nearby theatres. This has provided different experiences for children:

Some different larger colourful puppets are brought out from a ‘fabric house’ at the front of the stage. The studio lighting is used to change the colour of the room and the children are asked ‘Who can see purple?’, ‘Who can see green?’ The performers lead the children and parents in counting the puppets who are lined up at the front of the stage....

A performer announces ‘We are off to the stars’. Lights are used to make stars in the theatre. A ‘gold foil sheet’ planet is produced from the back corner – some children go under and over this. A ‘silver foil sheet’ planet is brought out from the front and performers are under this. Puppet ‘alien’ appears from the ‘silver planet’. A performer is now narrating a story about moving along the red river, the band is playing music in the background. Planets are merged to become a ‘planet of play’ about half the children in the theatre go under this ‘planet’. There is now a ‘Planet of Play’ song. During this song, the performers move around the room with large lighted hula hoops, foil planets and coloured chiffon scarves. Some of the scarves are placed over the children’s heads by the performers to change the colour they are seeing. This activity is quite immersive. Some children move on to the front stage area of theatre (Researcher observation: Chickenshed Theatre, Year 1, Term 1, October 2019).

These different experiences for children have impacted on both children and parents and in some cases opened up new possibilities that parents never thought were accessible to them:

I didn’t know about Chickenshed before the school started doing the workshop sessions. We went to see one of the shows organised by the school and my child loved it. We are going to take her again, it has sparked an interest that we didn’t know she had (Focus group: Parent, Rowland Hill, Year 3, Term 1, February 2022).

This demonstrates the impact of arts education for those children who do not have additional opportunities. The following extracts from interviews with practitioners from Alma reflect some of the challenges schools face in engaging with parents:

In the past parents haven’t always been involved and we have tried really hard to reach out to them and become involved in our activities, but we have had difficulty in getting them to come and join in...

Yes, one parent said that she wasn’t sure about it all [Chickenshed] at the start but now she has seen it, she can see how much her children love it and how much their confidence has grown. They used to be shy and now they’re not. They wouldn’t usually get up and dance, but now they do...
One of the children was a bit shy when Mum was there every week but when we went on the trip [to the theatre], she stayed in the audience and he went on stage and he really loved it; she saw him come to life. That’s the child we see every day, but he is different at home and Mum doesn’t quite believe us, so that was really great for her to see. She thinks now that she would be better to leave him and not come to the Chickenshed workshops because she has an effect on how he is when she is around. He is more clingy when Mum is there and more reluctant to take part, but he is very young [24 months] (Telephone interviews: Teachers/Practitioners, Alma, Year 1 and 2, 2019/2020).

Ownership can also be expressed through children’s creativity and the links that they make for themselves that demonstrate to teachers, practitioners and parents their grasp of a concept, learning and development. A parent attending the workshops and ‘stay and play’ sessions with her daughter who is nearly 2 years old spoke positively about her child’s connection with creative learning:

*She sings the songs all the time at home and makes connections between what she does at the sessions and in her play at home. Coming along to Chickenshed has helped her learn her colours. They have equipment like the chiffon scarves that you would never think of having at home. Coming along gives me ideas about what I can do with her at home. She made a link with what she does here when she was in the bath one evening. She linked the water in the bath with the blue chiffon scarf that they use as a river and started to sing that song when she was in the bath* (Interview: parent of a 22 month old, Carterhatch, Year 1, Term 2, February 2020).

Transferable skills from the workshops to the classroom are also evident for some of the teachers and practitioners. These are realised in the creative way children make links and sometimes spontaneously demonstrate their learning from the workshops to the classroom:

*I have noticed an improvement in language and literacy. We are doing a lot of spider diagrams to do with words and the story ‘going on a bear hunt’ and one child said ‘hibernation’ yesterday that they would never have come out with before… Signing has also been good because in the Chickenshed workshop, they sign the colours and that has really helped the children learn. So they are transferring what they are seeing in the workshops into the classroom. It hasn’t been explicitly taught, but because they are signing when they are talking or singing, when it comes back into the classroom they are doing it automatically…* (Interview: Teacher, Carterhatch, Year 1, Term 1, November 2019)

The themes from the project mapped to the empowerment framework and the focus on language, literacy and numeracy demonstrate the wealth of qualitative data generated from the observations, interviews and focus groups. Organised under the key findings the research reveals the contribution of Chickenshed workshops, complementing the extensive work that schools already do in supporting children’s holistic learning and development.
Conclusion

The research has explored the use of creative, inclusive theatre methods in pre-school practice, focusing on children’s experiences and engagement with language, literacy and numeracy. It has reported on the involvement of three schools in the London boroughs of Haringey and Enfield participating in the Chickenshed workshops. Over the 3 years children aged between 2 and 4 years old have benefited from the weekly sessions focusing on songs, rhyme, music, movement and the use of puppets to support children’s language, literacy and numeracy development. The Children’s Research Centre at The Open University has generated data on the project through a range of methods incorporating different perspectives and using a mosaic approach to document the collaboration between education and theatre based methods.

The 3 years (September 2019 - July 2022) have been unpredictable and included a long period of school closures due to the COVID pandemic. This resulted in creative responses from Chickenshed and a genuine desire from schools to continue to be involved in the project. The use of Tales TV and activity cards were examples of determination from Chickenshed and the schools that they youngest children should have a sense of continuity through an uncertain period.

The findings from the research have been insightful and mirrored the layered experiences of children’s lives. The influence from codes into focused themes of Child, Teacher/Practitioner and Learning and Development were mapped against the empowerment framework (Canning, 2020). This 3 stage process reveals the rich and diverse nature of learning, development and engagement through children’s participation, voice and ownership.

Over the period of the project, strong relationships have been built between Chickenshed and the schools. It has been a process of developing understanding of two different professions, with different aims and agendas coming together to create shared ways of working, and generating new knowledge and understanding. Children’s experiences through the workshops have been enriched by the imaginative and creative ways in which resources and the environment has been utilised by Chickenshed, but also how the workshop influence has permeated into everyday teaching practice. Equally, the workshops have become more refined and focused on supporting language, literacy and numeracy over the duration of the project. Chickenshed have adapted the workshops to meet the needs of the schools and in the process have increased their knowledge about the requirements schools are under pressure to achieve. The involvement for children in the workshops has demonstrated the value of playful interactions, with their peers, their teachers/practitioners, their parents and with the Chickenshed performers who, once strangers, are now welcomed as friends. All of this work has contributed to positive engagement with learning and has provided a strong foundation for the continuation of language, literacy and numeracy development.

Recommendations

These recommendations are based on the findings from the research and the potential for continuing collaborations.

- Continue to work on the transferability of Chickenshed workshop activities into the main teaching environment. This process is supporting professional knowledge transfer between theatre based performers and school educators.
• Celebrate the diverse and rich findings from the project which go beyond language, literacy and numeracy and acknowledge the significance of children’s layered and sometimes complex experiences from home, school, and their community.

• Recognise that there is still work to be done in theatre based education understanding the requirements of the Early Years Foundation Stage and mapping workshop content to those requirements. This will enable schools to clearly see the links, benefits and opportunities for nursery and school practice and teaching.

• Use Tales TV as a foundation for online learning for the youngest children to engage and support potentially isolated children.

• Recognise the significance of empowering children in playful interactions to support their learning and development and transferable life skills.

• Promote alternative ways of learning through theatre based methods, demonstrating the value in songs, rhyme, music, movement and role play for the youngest children in our society.

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Glossary of terms
• Parents – The term ‘parents’ in this report includes all guardians and foster carers
• Teachers – Professionals working in schools with a teaching qualification
• Early Years Practitioners/practitioners – Professional working in schools/nursery with an Early Years qualification or background
• Lead Educator – The headteacher, deputy headteacher, or Early Years coordinators within schools
• Focus groups – 3 or more teachers/practitioners or parents sharing their views with a researcher
• Stay and play – A group organised by the school/nursery where children and their parents access toys and resources for a morning or afternoon session where they are supported by an Early Years practitioner or coordinator.
• EYFS – Early Years Foundation Stage, the curriculum that schools adhere to for children up to Year 1 of school.
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