

Globe School: Chamber Tots Blog

Bell Class at Globe Primary School in Tower Hamlets is a specialist class for children from Nursery to Year 1 who have speech, language and communication delay. They are excellently supported by a teacher, speech and language therapist and teaching assistant, who are incredibly aware of each individual child's needs and of the effective strategies to support their learning and improve their confidence.

Wigmore Hall's Chamber Tots programme was successful in receiving Youth Music funding to work with the group in order to explore strategies for working with young children in this situation and to disseminate this understanding amongst the team and further afield. I've been working on Chamber Tots for more than 10 years, and with young children for 15 years, but I'd never specifically worked with such a group. At the time of writing, we're half way through the project, so what have I noticed and learnt so far?

Confidence is so much...

If we are feeling secure and content, we tend to act quite naturally and can learn because we want to and are enjoying the experience. Children with communication difficulties can really lack confidence: they know in some situations that they haven't been understood, but they don't know why and probably lack the skills/awareness to modify what they do to be understood. This means that every interaction they have with someone is potentially fraught and uncomfortable. Instead of happily exploring the potential of what they could do, there might be an underlying feeling of disquiet which easily becomes a lack of confidence.

So it's my job to lead activities which help them to feel secure with me, the visiting musicians and in the space. Activities in which they are allowed to take control, or influence its direction (and not necessarily verbally) and which always have a positive outcome whatever they do. I hope that building confidence in the music workshops with me will rub off in other parts of their lives.

Communication is a two-way thing...

Communication is a transaction, and quite a complicated process. We need:

- the will and the skill to be able to communicate an 'idea'
- to know that we've communicated because we've seen it make an impact on the person/people we are communicating to
- to listen to other's communication with us – so to regulate our own needs/volition so that we create space for another's communication with us
- to show that their communication to us has been heard, i.e. it has somehow impacted upon us

I think we can all be a bit rubbish in all these areas at one time or another. I certainly know I am! Children with communication skills might often have trouble in these areas. So, I have to be more attuned to them to figure out how I change my communication process in order to encourage theirs.

For instance, there was one child who found it difficult to change focus from one topic to another – he would remain 'stuck' expressing one thing (e.g. answering with his name when you'd asked a different question). So, when working with him, I had to allow extra time and space: his processing time was longer than most children of that age and then he had to muster the cognitive and motor skills to respond. It was great to see that this got quicker over the course of the project!

Be dynamic, imaginative and flexible...

Communication is an improvisation: we don't know what we're going to say before we start because we're responding to someone else in the moment. Good communication is therefore naturally dynamic. This also applies to leading an activity with a group: see how the group takes on the ideas, and then adjust, change and abandon if necessary. Wing it if you have to, but be *really responsive* when doing so. So:

- Dynamic: use very strong facial and gestural cues; use lots of movement activities; modulate the pitch of your voice perhaps more than you would normally
- Imaginative: find stories, pictures, props and other classroom 'tools' which might engage them and promote their understanding/learning. Plan activities in which they get to lead and see where it goes.
- Flexible: Be prepared to have ideas in the moment and grab stuff as required: sometimes this can really work. I get really excited as I've discovered a new activity in the moment, and everyone else is in on that discovery at the same time. For instance: grabbing phonics cards to help make a magic spell, turning a big piece of rolled up material into a tree by lifting up one end of it (dead easy, but really effective – got an 'ooh' from the group – but only thought of it in the moment).

What's creativity?

One of the songs I use often leads into an improvised story. The song promotes different ways of moving, and I can ask 'Which animal could we be? How does it move?' and do a new version which characterises the suggested animal. From these animal characters we can develop a silly story together. It's always great fun.

But with this group there are some further considerations to be made. Open questions can be challenging for them: they get lost in the possibilities or find it hard to articulate what they're thinking. This might mean taking more time with the group, but also giving clear choices to them, so that they don't feel overwhelmed by limitless possibilities.

My first attempt at making a story with them was interesting, as only a couple of them were able to really follow the *causation* of it – how one thing leads to another. This is perhaps another factor of communication: to hold a conversation we have to connect one statement to the next, which is cognitively quite demanding (how often do we all end up in situations thinking *what do I say next?*). And a dilemma for me arose: I think it's important to make up stuff *with* the group, so that they really influence what's happening. However, with this group it's helpful to have extra props, etc., so that their understanding of what is going on is reinforced. It's only possible to have props and pictures ready if one knows the story in advance and obviously in this situation I don't know that.

So, we haven't explored the development of their stories so much yet: and perhaps this might become something we do in the next phase. Create a simple story to start with: an elephant meets a beetle and they fall over would be enough for session 1. Returning to this story each week and adding to it with musical accompaniment would provide a consistently developing learning activity for them all, would allow teachers to explore and reinforce elements between sessions and would help them to grasp causation.

Creating a story as a group, listening to others' contributions, etc., requires high-level creative thinking skills (I now realise!). But, in an individual, child-led context the class members would be much more creative. Some of them made up songs whilst playing, they would change the words to

songs they know, they explored different voices in their play, and they explored percussion instruments and different ways to play them. This smaller, more personal creativity, where we are making choices in the moment is fundamental to our imagination and creativity. By making little creative decisions (perhaps without knowing that we are even doing so) we gain confidence in our own judgement. This might be validated if there is someone else present who hears, accepts and encourages our creative choices. Over time, these small choices might form themselves into a larger creative effort (e.g. making a story or a piece), but without the little moments of inspiration, the larger structuring needed to create 'a piece' won't happen. The children in Bell Class haven't yet moved from the small scale creative efforts and need some extra, structured support to do so.

How to ask questions?

Questions are possibly the most important tool for the teacher, and working with those who have communication difficulties can really help to hone one's skill in asking them. They need to be simple and clear, give definite choices where necessary and be supported with appropriate non-verbal gestures (facial gestures and body language). The teacher then needs to give the children time to figure out the question and respond: it's so easy to just jump in too early either re-framing it or giving the answer.

Child-led and adult-led can produce different reactions in the same child

Context is really important: who we are (or appear to be) at any given moment is partly defined by who we're with and the dynamic between us. This is the same with young children, and I think it's really important to work with them both in adult-led and child-led contexts. One child appeared to be withdrawn in an adult-led group situation. He seemed to find it difficult to engage, often looked quite blank and if asked a question it could take him quite some time to answer it. However, in a child-led context, he played imaginatively, made up/altered songs and sang really expressively. The difference was striking. But later in the project he has begun to join in more effectively in an adult-led group situation: so he is learning the skills needed to function with others.

Supportive teachers are worth their weight in gold

Bell Class in many ways are an absolute dream to work with. They are so responsive, positive and enthusiastic! In large part this is due to the wonderful teachers who work with them. They're a small class and the adult-child ratio is high in favour of the adults. The teachers know the children really well, having a great understanding of their charges, which they're happy to share with the project team. As a result, the children feel secure and cared for, and have been able to take the opportunities we've provided as a visiting team and really use them to develop their confidence and skills. When visiting projects work well in an institution, it is often because of the support received from the group's regular members of staff. Working with Bell Class has really reminded me of this, and I am so grateful to them!