



BECERA Conference 2016

By Jane Parker



CASE STUDIES

Risk, Adventure, Challenge in the Early Years: Creating opportunities for life-long learning

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On Tuesday 16th February I was incredibly fortunate to be part of a wonderful supportive community of early years practice at the mac in Birmingham. This was the sixth annual BECERA conference where all those who are passionate about their work in early years came together to collaborate in sharing and co-constructing their ideas and thinking on current issues. Tony Bertram and Chris Pascal (CREC Directors and Conference Committee organisers) set the warm welcoming tone right from the start of the conference as they urged everyone to be 'critical friends', establishing that the aim of the conference was to set up dialogues with one another that would delve deeper in to issues we are all struggling with. They encouraged us to try and aim for our 'five a day', ensuring by the end of the conference everyone had met and shared their experiences with five new people.

The theme of the conference was round risk, adventure and challenge. This was two fold. Firstly from the perspective of our professional role as early years practitioners ensuring we are keeping children safe whilst also creating exiting environments to try things out. Secondly, the theme also refers to our own risks we face, reflecting on new ways of thinking and trying things out ourselves. Chris argued that if we are ever going to take ourselves forward in our practice, like our young children, we will also need the courage to take that leap faith when faced with a new way of thinking. Sometimes we also have to position ourselves out of *our* safe zone. This was set to be an exciting, participatory and democratic conference in which we were all encouraged to be adventurous, give voice and share power in a creative and challenging forum.

The day began and ended with two insightful keynotes. In the opening keynote address by Jane Waters, the subject of 'cotton wool kids' was discussed. Jane shared this thought provoking quote from David Didau (www.learningspy.co.uk)

'Learning is a messy, complicated business. Imagine yourself standing before a dark, ominous doorway. Through it you can glimpse something previously unimagined, but entering and crossing through entails a risk – anything might happen. Not passing through, while safe, means you will never know what's on the other side.'

Jane urged us to critically reflect upon the notion of 'safe and secure' in order to ensure that this emphasis does not stifle children's experiences of adventure, risk and challenge. Thinking about it from my own perspectives as an Early Years Music Practitioner, do we always offer our young children a safe space to take risks in their musical play? Or do we sometimes, without realizing it, stifle them?

Later in the day, we were also given a whistle-stop tour of the Together Old and Young (TOY) research project, exploring intergenerational learning with Margaret Kernan. This presentation discussed the processes and outcomes when time and space are created for young children and old people to simply play together. Margaret shared with us the wonderful possibilities of society learning and transforming culture together. Her research, which we can learn much from as music educators, is filled with many photos, videos and first-hand accounts here www.toyproject.net . Both keynote presentations are available to view and download on the 'Resources' page <http://www.becera.org.uk/resources>

The rest of the day was filled with a variety of wonderful presentations that gave an opportunity for practitioners to share their wide-ranging knowledge and reflect on their meaningful and relevant current practice. Presentations ranged from introducing mindfulness to young children, looking at young children's experiences with touchscreen technology, to thinking about how we can use recorded music effectively. The latter featured our own LEYMN member Nicola Burke who shared with us her exploratory study of what happened when she created rich listening experiences for babies and young children. Nicola explained that she had devised an action research project that involved sharing a wide range of music genres with children. Her main findings were that children listen to music in all manner of ways and can be highly competent learners. She found that some children preferred to listen whilst painting, whilst others preferred to listen whilst moving and indeed others preferred to simply just listen. Nicola wisely suggests that the auditory environment for our young children needs to be given much more thought and consideration. As a result of the research, Nicola has created a free online resource <https://macbirmingham.co.uk/project/tune-into-listening-project/> that shares wonderful videos showing the activities that were explored. The resource also offers ideas and questions to explore in our Early Years settings. Nicola is clearly passionate about raising awareness regarding auditory environments in Early Years settings and believes that we could all benefit by continuing to explore how we can use recorded music effectively to create rich musical listening experiences for young children. She proposes '...further research and debate is clearly needed in this area to enable us all to have a deeper understanding of the impact that recorded music is having and can have on young children' (Burke, 2016, p. 37).

The conference was a wonderful example of how to encourage early years conversations and lively debate. I am immensely grateful to LEYMN who gave me the opportunity to attend such a worthwhile participatory conference. It is important for all of us involved in music education to continue to explore the topic of risk, adventure and challenge in the early years. We must continue to examine how we can create exciting learning musical environments that will both challenge and inspire adults and young children alike.

Jane Parker, March 2016.

Reference

Burke, N. (2016). *Auditory Environment – How can we use recorded music effectively?* Paper presented at BECERA Conference 2016, Birmingham.