**Title**

Lorna as a Reflective Leader: Introducing ‘Helicopter Stories’ to promote communication and language, and personal, social and emotional development.

**Project aim**: To introduce an inclusive helicopter story approach

**Objectives**:

* To evaluate the theory of Helicopter Stories and plan to implement the approach
* To promote personal social and emotional development (PSED) and communication and language (C&L) through the helicopter story initiative
* To empower other educators to facilitate Helicopter Stories

**Context**

As a highly qualified early years educator and experienced manager of a church-based pre-school, registered for 26 children, Lorna is a confident leader. Over recent years she observed how more children in the setting were presenting with speech, language and communication needs. She then saw first-hand how the coronavirus pandemic lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 exacerbated these needs for many children and she noted a general decline in personal, social and emotional development.

Whilst studying for early years teacher status Lorna was inspired to discover more about a long-held interest in the helicopter story approach. Lorna learnt how educators can facilitate helicopter stories by listening with genuine interest to a child telling a story whilst scribing exactly what the child says and then repeating it back for clarity. She understood the need to allow the child to be the expert in their story and take ownership, seeing the story through the eyes of the child and making sense of it from the child’s perspective rather than their own (Lee, 2015).

**Rationale for the focus**

Speech and language in the early years continues to decline (MBA, 2021) and there has been a general decline in storytelling in the home (Cremin, 2013). Literacy in the early years is currently the lowest-achieving area of learning and is a focus for government improvement (DfE, 2019). Provider concerns related to children's development in PSE and C&L were included as main findings by Ofsted in their last COVID-19 briefing on early years (Ofsted, 2020). On learning that the helicopter stories approach naturally encompassed elements of PSED and C&L, Lorna chose to introduce and embed the practice to combat challenges in her setting specifically turn taking, self-confidence, self-esteem and talk.

Helicopter stories is based on the work of American educator, Vivian Gussin Paley (1990) who spent many years reflecting on her teaching with young children and used storytelling and acting techniques to improve outcomes for children (Paley, 1990). Paley used a holistic approach to enable children to tell a story, which she scribed in the moment. Each child was invited to act out their story with peers. The approach has grown in popularity in the UK through the work of Trisha Lee, who founded a theatre and educational company offering a storytelling and acting curriculum in 2002. Paley (1990) and Lee (2015) found children made significant progress in PSED and C&L. The approach gave children a voice, provided a sense of agency and raised confidence and self-esteem. Children also became motivated to write their own stories independently over time. Lee (2015) maintains that writing is not the central purpose of Helicopter stories although it is clearly a naturally occurring benefit.

Supporting the work of Pugh and Lee, Cremin et al (2013), Ephgrave (2015), Stewart (2014), and Holme (2020) surmise that helicopter stories effectively promote holistic development including children's PSED and C&L development and aiding later literacy skills such as reading and writing. Cremin et al. (2013) also noted improved confidence in quieter children and those with English as an additional language.

**Implementation & Effectiveness**

The action plan is rooted in directional leadership. Lorna is a reflective leader, able to articulate a collective and compelling vision that is owned and shared by the community. Working together creates a consistent approach to teaching and learning that encourages individual and team reflection (Siraj-Blatchford & Hallett, 2014). Lorna used Schon’s reflective theory (1983) as a structure to examine the practice development. Lorna found Schon’s approach particularly relevant to their early years practice as it allowed space for staff to respond reflexively to the children’s interests both “in action” and “on action”.

When devising her action plan, Lorna was sensitive to the needs of both staff and children. Not wanting to overwhelm them or set herself unrealistic targets, she divided her implementation into three phases. This allowed time to involve the setting’s educators in planning and to build their confidence to deliver the approach. Phase one focused on a small cohort of children with SLCN who would benefit from additional support, phase two involved the oldest children to ensure they had the opportunity to engage before leaving, and phase three enabled all children across the setting the opportunity to participate.

In implementing her action plan, Lorna shared the proposed change with the educators and led staff training, producing her own written guidance for them. Lorna identified an area to stage the helicopter story sessions and made space nearby to display written stories. Wishing to embed the approach throughout the learning environment, she audited the continuous provision of mark making resources and found that they were somewhat neglected and uninspiring. She addressed this, creating portable boxes filled with a diverse selection of mark-making and paper-craft resources to inspire learners.

Lorna reflected carefully on how to train colleagues who did not have prior knowledge or experience of helicopter stories. She used video clips to facilitate exploration and discussion, motivating the team to devise a collaborative approach that incorporated their diverse skills and experience. The team discussed how Lorna would deliver Helicopter Stories initially with support from experienced early years educators. She gave opportunities for colleagues to voice ideas, actively listening and responding to suggestions and consequently promoting professional satisfaction.

Ready to deliver phase one of Helicopter Stories, Lorna found that initial interest in the sessions was strong, and the children enjoyed acting out the example stories from Lee’s book (2015). However, when she tried to gather original stories from the group, some children became distracted and went to play elsewhere whilst others needed a great deal of support in telling their stories. Reflecting after-action (Schon, 1983), Lorna realised that using a separate available room for phase two could support concentration by limiting distraction. As Lorna entered phase two, she found that the children showed strong engagement with each other’s stories as well as enthusiastically creating their own. Lorna and the team reflected that the higher engagement was likely to be due to a combination of factors including: the quieter space, the experience and enthusiasm of the educators leading the approach, the children involved in phase one demonstrating positive responses to others and the children in phase two being older.

In phase three, Lorna found that children who had previously refused to participate, were now eager to join in in the main area. Staff and children had become familiar and confident with the approach and were motivated by success. The children developed their communication and language skills around the project, in some cases helping each other with details and vocabulary for stories. It was impressive to see how children confidently engaged in acting out characters and scenery, without relying on prompts from an adult. The children’s sense of ownership over their stories was strong e.g. they instructed their peers on where to stand as well as how to move. Cremin et al (2013) proposed that Helicopter Stories improved children’s listening ability, confidence, turn-taking and communication skills, and Lorna witnessed this growing with pace after only a few sessions. The mark making boxes were a great success, encouraging emergent writing through independent story scribing in child-initiated play with children assigning meaning to the marks they made.

**Conclusion**

As a highly qualified educator and confident reflective leader, Lorna was able to introduce a whole setting approach to helicopter stories effectively. Lorna’s Eary Years Initial Teacher training empowered her to approach her project with a rigorous understanding of both reflective practice and of leadership theory. The approach is now embedded in practice with more staff taking responsibility for delivering the approach with favourable PSED and C&L outcomes for children. Lorna empowered both children and educators in her setting to enjoy and achieve, they took risks, collaborated successfully and learnt new skills.

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