



The Creative Skills Podcast
Episode 3: Drama Outdoors, Imagination and Non-Verbal
Communication with Hazel Darwin-Clements

Transcript

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Transcript

Heather Armstrong (00:09):

Welcome to episode three of Starcatchers Creative Skills Online. I'm Heather Armstrong. On this podcast, we're hosting a series of chats with the amazing artists who usually deliver our Creative Skills training for the early years workforce in Scotland.

I just want to say the response we've had to the first two episodes has been absolutely phenomenal. So, I want to thank everybody who's been watching the videos and downloading the reflective practice sheets and sharing the Wee Inspirations. Oh! And a special shout out to all the lovely people joining our online Creative Chats on Zoom. If you haven't joined us there already, then I hope you will next time.

I know 2020's been hard for everyone, and I love that there are so many people working in the early years who are still determined to make this time as creative and playful and joyful as possible. Today I'm joined by one of my favourite creative and playful and joyful people: Hazel Darwin-Clements! Hazel, how you doing?

Hazel Darwin-Clements (01:00):

Hello! I'm good. Thank you. How are you?

Heather Armstrong (01:04):

I'm great! I'm especially excited to talk to you today because it's coming up on my seven-year anniversary working for Starcatchers and with Creative Skills - and you've been working with me since the very beginning. So, there's a massive wealth of experience on this Zoom conversation today, and I'm really excited to be picking your brains. So thank you for joining me.

Hazel Darwin-Clements (01:23):

Oh, thank you for asking me. It's nice to have this conversation.

Heather Armstrong (01:26):

So I'm going to kick off by asking you about your practice, some of the kind of thinking and ethos behind it, and why you love working with wee ones.

Hazel Darwin-Clements (01:35):

I come from a background – a world of theatre of drama, of puppetry, playfulness and being present and in the moment and in the mood to play.

So, I suppose I'm really interested in imagination. And I have changed and adapted and grown like all the time that I've worked with really small children because they always surprise me - and practitioners always surprise me and I think that's why it's exciting - and that's what keeps me going.

I suppose, some things over the years that I've been really interested in is exploring what it means to be a creative adult in the room in a child-led environment: an adult collaborating equally with a really young child is quite interesting and exciting to me.

And at the moment, I'm really interested in all things about imagining nurseries and childcare centres at the heart of communities which are adapting, changing, coming together.

Oh, and the other thing I'm really excited about is being outdoors at the moment. I've just spent a long time with my two- and four-year olds learning from them about being present with children and playing. And really what they've taught me is just that being outside all day makes everybody happy and makes everybody in the mood for play - and there's all sorts of games and fun that we can have in... well, maybe not all weathers - most weathers. In most weathers!

Heather Armstrong (03:12):

That's really lovely to hear. I think we've all been through a process over the last six or seven months where, necessarily, everything's been stepped back and then you need to start finding out what's really important, don't you? And see... what actually, you know, what skills are we falling back on? And adjusting to a new normal - what can we do? What can we think of?

And particularly spending more time outdoors, I think has become - the more you're told you have to stay in the house or inside the more important outdoors becomes! - and of course, the less you can travel as well. So, I'm really, really interested that that's a that's really works for you and your wee ones as well?

Hazel Darwin-Clements (03:49):

I always thought we spent quite a bit of time outdoors anyway, but I've discovered all of the tiny details of the very local park that we have that's on our doorstep and like - just spending time there and really getting to know that I think has been quite exciting.

Not having to, you know, take the car and go to the beach - we used to have quite a bit more reach and now [we're] bringing those things really small. I think that's really part of the world of a two and a four-year-old.

Heather Armstrong (04:21):

And of course, we are recording this podcast to try and help inspire the early years workforce to get them some ideas and help them feel a bit more positive and energised and excited about being creative in these, kind of, very new times.

And I know we've spoken before about the fact that there are new regulations in place - you'll know yourself, with your wee one in nursery. I think for me, one of the most important things was to say - "well, actually, okay, so we know where the limitations are. We know there's, you know, in some ways kind of less freedom than before, but actually what can we do within that?".

And really, I wanted to pick your brain a little bit about those ideas of drama and imagination and

some of the ideas that maybe practitioners could be thinking about as we are facing this new COVID world.

Hazel Darwin-Clements (05:09):

I suppose one thing that really excites me is the idea of taking a story or a roleplay and expanding on that, whether that's one-on-one or whether that's as a big group - it works both ways.

So, we would set out on a mission from our house - be like, "right, what's our mission?" and then add to that story as we go. But it's open-ended so it could start with the beginning of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, but I'm not necessarily going to hit the points of that traditional narrative to the end. I might do - if that's a story that they know and that's where they take it, but we could equally end up time-traveling and, you know, being with the dinosaurs and then going to the pirates.

And I suppose having a small group of children feed into that and facilitating that is quite exciting because then you would end up in a world that followed their interests and brought in all of their different interests and shared that with each other!

Heather Armstrong (06:12):

Yeah. So are you talking about literally going for a walk?

Hazel Darwin-Clements (06:16):

That's one way that I think is really exciting to do it, if you've got the capacity to do that, and you want to take a journey, even if that's just around the outdoor space that you have in your setting. Or if you are a childminder, you could actually take that into the woods, for example.

That's something that seems very, very simple, but actually practicing that and getting skilled at that is something that could be quite interesting - and hopefully fun as well.

Heather Armstrong (06:44):

Yeah, absolutely. No, there is a thing - and it kind of touches on what you were saying earlier on about that kind of "co-creation" - like genuinely letting very young children have their, you know, have their voice and genuinely work *together* in a creative process.

It is that thing, isn't it - you may set out with *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* in your heads, but practicing being able to kind of give that narrative over and say "well, actually, what *is* going to happen?" - and yes, maybe a dinosaur will appear! It's a real skill isn't it? To embrace that and kind of go with it?

Hazel Darwin-Clements (07:19):

It is and it's a really interesting conversations as well, because it's not about standing back and letting all of the responsibility fall on the young people but then it's equally not about taking over and bulldozing everyone's ideas. So, it's a real - being a listening collaborator, isn't it? And that's something I think that's difficult to learn.

One of the interesting things you could think about is about how much you say “yes”, like generally [laughs] to children. But saying “yes” is not always the default - and there's loads of really important practical reasons for that like sharp knives and difficult, dangerous situations, or even just like you can't stop and explain every single time! But you create spaces and environments in imaginative play where it's totally great to say “yes!”

Heather Armstrong (08:18):

Maybe this is terrible to admit - or maybe this is just a moment of growth - but definitely when my daughter was younger, my default would be to say “no” to things, but then I would catch myself and go: why am I saying “no”?

And, for me, it was really important to process, to kind of challenge the “no”s and say, well, “is that a no? Is that a reason for that?” - and, I suppose, kind of challenging your own perceptions of what's right and what's possible. I know I learned to open up a lot during that process of genuinely spending time with her and going - oh, actually, you know, maybe the typical adult response is to say “no” to something, because it may be a bit silly or a bit messy or dah dah dah [etc.]. But I had to kind of train myself to be like, well, actually - like you say, as long as it's not dangerous! - the when to say “yes” becomes really important as well, doesn't it?

And I think because, you know, for very good reasons, our young children do have more restrictions over what they're able to do, being able to engage them in imagination and being able to see “yes” during that process, it becomes even more important. Doesn't it?

Hazel Darwin-Clements (09:26):

Yeah. That's a lovely point, Heather. That's really nice.

And it reminds me as well that often in this kind of play some things that they're worried about will come out. I've found myself playing a game in which the bug [COVID-19] comes in - because that's something that they're trying to process and that they're trying to understand and, and making spaces for that to happen safely with an adult [are important].

Heather Armstrong (09:51):

I think as well, you know, we talk sometimes about that kind of “wall of silence” around nurseries - you pick your wee one up and say “Oh, you know, how'd you get in today? What happened?” and they're like “nothing, nothing happened”, and you're like “...really?”

But sometimes actually having those conversations through play later on is a much more effective thing. Just giving children a chance to explore roleplay, just explore their imagination and just kind of chat and through play - a lot of the time you get much better information anyway, don't you?

Hazel Darwin-Clements (10:21):

Yeah! And I read a really interesting book ages ago called *We're Friends Right?* about this guy who went into lots of different nurseries in different cultures and was just kind of talking about the play

that comes out in different cultures, because it is mirroring and exploring different places.

So, for example, in one community, the hairdressing salon was really at the centre of all of the community there. And particularly for the men, they would take their sons with them to get their hair cut in this community. And so that was the game - that was, you know, how they mimicked! And I suppose that's, that's what I mean - it's just like... it's such a natural and interesting way to get insight into what they're picking up and what they're processing at that moment - to be present playing with them. But you know that already, if you spend time around children.

Heather Armstrong (11:19):

Yeah. So, when you're working with wee ones, what are some of your favourite ideas to kind of start that imaginative play?

Hazel Darwin-Clements (11:27):

Okay. So, one thing that I've been really enjoying recently is, you know loads of little weed gardens are growing in between the cracks [laughs] in the pavement? And I just think they're so beautiful. So, we've been going right and finding little weed gardens and making them into little worlds, little lands and they're all quite different. So, some of them are good homes for dinosaurs and at other ones are kind of islands. And obviously have to be quite careful with traffic - so find somewhere that's not a problem!

But noticing small, tiny details, whether it's like holes in the wall or a particular unusual branch on a tree. And I think that this is really in tune with how small people experience the world. And so really coming with them, getting them to share something that they've noticed. And it's fun - cause you start spotting different things on your tiny patch in a way that you hadn't seen them before! And it changes with the seasons and you might discover bugs and you know - what's under this rock?

Or, it could work on an indoor setting as well. You can, you know, find a crack in the wall or a switch that nobody knows what it does. So, using those as kind of places for inspiration to start.

Heather Armstrong (12:51):

I love that. I love the idea of just like... almost taking the time to slow down and see the little details that you wouldn't normally be paying attention to. It really taps into that like early years classic isn't it - those "I wonder..." statements. "I wonder... I wonder who could live through that little door?" or, you know, "I wonder what that could be?", and just giving children the chance to - and also give yourself the chance to - create those worlds together. That's really beautiful.

I think I'm really interested at the moment about this idea of being outside and being in communities - in our own communities, and being able to explore what we used to take for granted, you know?

And I know when we were having our pre-chat chat over the weekend, you were talking about actually other ideas that you'd invested in about kind of community art and things like that. So, do

you want to expand a little bit on that?

Hazel Darwin-Clements (13:46):

So I haven't done this yet cause it's not been dark enough [laughs] but I did hear - and you know, no ideas that are original - but it sort of came into my imagination from somewhere that you might do a shadow puppet show from your window when it was, you know, dark earlier and that - if we're looking for something to do in the dark winter time, that is sort of theatrical and beautiful and possibly in place of some other magical activity that would traditionally happen at Christmas that involves lots of bodies in a close space, breathing each other's air - some sort of window lit up... a street with lit up windows, and images in those windows could be a lovely thing for a community to do!

Or even just inviting our neighbour round for a five-minute shadow puppet performance from your window one night and then the next day or the next week, you can go right into theirs and see it, even if that's high up. That could be a lovely thing, couldn't it?

Heather Armstrong (14:52):

Yeah, yeah. That's really lovely!

Hazel Darwin-Clements (14:53)

And there might be other performative ideas that you could have, you know, Jack Frost - somebody dressed up as Jack Frost - could go, round in the middle of the night... Well not the middle of the night - it gets dark in Scotland quite early, so like 4 o'clock! [laughs]

They could go round and then you could let people know to have little noses pressed up against the windows - just to see something magical come through. I think that's quite exciting!

Heather Armstrong (15:20):

It's a really important point, you know, we've been talking for years in ELC in general about the importance of being outdoors and I think particularly during lockdown, the last six months, everyone's [realised] - oh my goodness, no, we, we really do, like, as a society we need to take this more seriously!

But there's a real practical thing about, you know, we're coming into Scottish winter and yeah... it will be dark by four o'clock and it will probably be dark till about nine o'clock in some days as well!

So, the idea of having creative ideas that take children outside during those darker times as well... I think it's really valuable to be able to say, well, actually just because it's dark outside doesn't mean we just need to stay in, you know? So, I think there's something really exciting about being able to play with light and shadow puppets and windows!

Hazel Darwin-Clements (16:09):

And winter is full of really beautiful days as well, and really amazing outdoor experiences to be had in winter. You just have to pick your moment [laughs], don't you? And be flexible... and, you

know, that can be led by the weather, but also led by the children and their energies.

Heather Armstrong (16:29):

Yeah, absolutely. You're absolutely right. It's about being flexible and recognising you know, whether it's about all that, you know - it's really windy day, so let's see what we can do with that or whether it's - oh it's one of those beautiful, clear crisp days, what could we do with that?

I know what you mean. I think to be realistic, it's not every kind of weather - but most weathers you can do something with. Most weathers there's that imaginative approach. With important caveat: with the right clothing! [laughs]

Hazel Darwin-Clements (16:59):

Yeah, you're right. Clothing for everybody, for the adults and the children [laughs]

Heather Armstrong (17:06):

I have memories of kind of, you know, working with the ones in lovely kind of snowsuits and they were fine and I was absolutely chattering. And I'm like - wait a minute, no, I need to think my own wardrobe through here!

Hazel Darwin-Clements (17:16):

And it is just - I think it is just - riding the wave of the energy of the group as well, isn't it? And you know, trying to bulldoze your own timetable and a set plan and you know, things you want to achieve can feel difficult [laughs]. Whereas taking an unexpected turn in a direction that you weren't expecting can feel quite fun - if you can get your head around that being good practice rather than being frustrated!

Oh right. Everybody wants to go out? Right. We're prepared for that - let's go! Let's smash ice - smashing ice is fun. Those sorts of things. Yeah.

Heather Armstrong (17:59):

It's my absolute favourite. Icy days are the best days, they're better than summer days. There's more to do. I'm absolutely convinced of that.

Hazel Darwin-Clements (18:08):

Yeah. There is a... there's a real natural magic about it. And if we can't have lots of glitter in panto stages, maybe we can have lots of glitter in the pavement and in the trees.

Heather Armstrong (18:20):

I know in your practice before you've explored this idea of the naive adult. Do you want to talk a little bit about that? Because I found it absolutely fascinating.

Hazel Darwin-Clements (18:29):

You talking about my space woman?

Heather Armstrong (18:33):

[excitedly] Yes! [both laugh]. But for people who haven't seen it-

Hazel Darwin-Clements (18:34):

So, um, like years and years and years ago, we landed a "spaceship" outside a crèche and we were space people and we were there for the week and we were exploring what it would be like if we were characters who really didn't know anything about the world and that the young people were the experts and they showed us. We actually waited outside the window until we were invited into their space and then we sort of took the rules of, of naive clowns who really knew nothing about how anything worked and we didn't know how to put on bibs, and we didn't know that we were supposed to wash our hands and... you know, and let the children like lead us into their world - just as an experiment!

But there's something about that that stayed with me in my practice. I think it's really interesting to, to not assume... So, another example - we were elves one time and we were like, pretending that we'd forgotten about Christmas and what we were supposed to do at Christmas time. And so, we got the children to share us and we had a cracker and we were like, so how do you open it? And one little boy was like: "scissors!" and he went and got a pair of scissors for us and [laughs]. Honestly! - it'd been a long time in the life of a three-year-old since last Christmas and he'd forgotten how to open crackers!

But you have to kind of be like, instead of being like: "no, no, I'm sure that's not the way!" I was like - I genuinely can't think of a reason why that's not a really good way to open this cracker? [laughs]

Heather Armstrong (20:16):

Right?! [laughs]

Hazel Darwin-Clements (20:19):

So we go with his idea and I always have thought about that afterwards because obviously he's been gone home at Christmas and everyone's been like: "No you don't use scissors! You pull them!" and he's gone "Ahhh!" So, should I have, should have challenged that at the time? - but my character was naïve! Anyway, it's for fun, right?

But as an artist, I think is quite an interesting thing to open up - if there are moments where their opinion is somehow either equal or perhaps that they are even expert! And drama offers you the opportunity to explore that a little bit.

So, for example, the woods near us, my son has renamed lots of the areas of it and I've been like: "Oh, right!" and actually now when sometimes we meet other people - he'll be like "Oh, do you know what this hill is called?" and tell them that name [that he's made up]. And luckily everyone plays along and they're like: "Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. Great!" and he feels... I feel like he's really confident about that! And he's growing in that - and that's quite fun.

Heather Armstrong (21:26):

Yeah! It's beautiful. And I think there is something so powerful about giving very young children the opportunity to be experts and their own lives, you know, whether it's about what they call the hill or how to open a cracker. And the reason I brought up that naive adult role is because, you know, having seen the footage of when you were an alien and then seeing how you've used it within sessions over the years as well, there's just something really powerful and beautiful about it. In fact, I won't just talk about this, I will share the video I hope you don't mind?

Hazel Darwin-Clements (22:11):

Oh! Those unflattering silver onesies! [laughs]

Heather Armstrong (22:16):

I should say if anyone listening who's hoping to pick up ideas, you don't need to wear a Bacofoil style skin-tight onesie to try this idea [laughs]

But it was quite young children you were working with wasn't it? Kind of around two [years old]?

Hazel Darwin-Clements (22:31):

It was creche so it was anybody, yeah, all ages 0-5.

Heather Armstrong (22:34):

What I really loved about it was that you could see, you know, there were some children that were kind of verbally kind of telling you what to do, but actually even for pre and nonverbal children the aliens were struggling with play-dough, or whatever, or paint and they were physically showing you.

For those young children, that would have been a really powerful moment to be like - well, actually I know something and I have something to share - and just as importantly, there is someone here who is *listening* to what I have to say and really responding to it. And yeah, even if they are telling you to cut open a cracker, rather than pull it, you know, there's, there's a power attached to that and I mean, in terms of agency, in terms of recognising themselves as people with knowledge and an ideas to communicate, which is just... what an amazing gift to give really young children!

Hazel Darwin-Clements (23:34):

Yeah. And I'm glad you mentioned that, cause I'm really interested in this kind of non-verbal communication that you get with a really young baby - or somebody who's nonverbal or perhaps has a different language - and just taking the time to sit with them and pick up on the other cues that they give you, even if it is just that you just sit together for a while, but you feel connected to them and then perhaps look at what they're looking at or... it's so simple, isn't it? But it can turn into something like to have that kind of connection to feel that connection, to give that space and time it will probably inevitably lead into play.

Heather Armstrong (24:17):

Yeah, absolutely.

Hazel Darwin-Clements (24:20):

There's something else that I quite often talk about with early years practitioners, cause they're masters of it, is dramatic tension. Right, so in the theatre, it's all about, you know, building up suspense for your audience, getting those moments. And that's about a pause really. And in that pause, the imagination kicks in and it starts working and it's like [dramatic voice] what's going to happen?!

And so often in early years settings that would look like you have a bag - what's in the bag? What could it be? Or you have a box - a special box! - you can shake it and you can hear a noise of something that's in the box, but what is it?

And that's, that's like, you know, the bread and butter of theatre, isn't it? It's dramatic tension, but it's also... what you're doing in that moment is allowing imagination to kick in.

It's woven into everything you do in the way that you can weave in numeracy. So, when you're handing out the plates for snack, you'll just go: one, two, three, four plates - that's you weaving numeracy into the everyday activities. So, you're weaving in play, imagination and dramatic tension into everything that you do and you have a little sparkle in your eyes and you're playing in that moment. And you can't do that without having a connection to each other, which is nonverbal... often!

Heather Armstrong (25:56):

Yeah. That's so beautiful, and it's so true. I think one of the most valuable things that we get from creating together is that connection, isn't it? You can't go through a creative process - a genuine creative process shared with people - without connecting. There's a real kind of human element of it.

Aw, I'm getting the warm fuzzies now, this is so lovely!

Hazel Darwin-Clements (26:25):

[laughs] I think that playing with verbal and nonverbal is quite interesting for that because I think in some ways you get a better connection in a nonverbal way. And isn't it masterful when you can get the attention of 20 children without saying anything? And there are going to be people listening to this here, practitioners, who are like "Oh yeah, I can do that!"

Whether it's with a little bell or a light switch or whatever... but then they're looking at you, they're focused on you and you're feeling that connection with them. You're keeping that connection with them.

Heather Armstrong (26:59):

Yeah. What I often found though, running the training, it's not that... You're absolutely right, you know, loads of early years professionals know exactly how to do that - but they don't always kind of stop and recognise the value of it.

So, it's a really nice thing to be able to turn around and say: actually, see what you're doing in that moment - you might think you're just being a bit silly, you may think you're having a carry on, but actually what you're doing is really important and really magical.

One of the phrases that kind of kept coming up, I think it's in *Building the Ambition* actually, but one of the things that they talk about is their learning environment that children needs and in how young children learn, and one of the things that they say explicitly [is] learning activities that help instil "a sense of wonder"¹.

And I did my classic "I'm reading a policy, I'm reading a policy" [then] I got to that bit and I was like, a kinda fist pump in the air of like: "yes! yes!" [because] that's *exactly* what we need - and that's exactly what drama and imaginative play bring - this "sense of wonder" to something that would otherwise be quite ordinary.

But you're absolutely right, it is that difference between plonking something out, or leaving it out on a table, and seeing young children engage versus [gasp] "what is in the box? What could it be?" - you know, building that tension and really getting everybody to invest emotionally and invest their imaginations to say - well actually what is possible and what is that?

And I know - well, we both know - one of the classic drama games is actually that there's nothing in the box!

Hazel Darwin-Clements (28:29):

And they have to imagine what's in the box - that's the next level! Yeah. And you have to embody what's in the box and then it can transform into something else. Yeah. It's a great, great game.

Heather Armstrong (28:39):

It's lovely.

Hazel Darwin-Clements (28:40):

But it's an important point that imagination is quite often dismissed and set aside and seen as a kind of fluffy - "Oh, alright. Well, once we've done some of the *real* core skills that you need in life, then we can, you know, have fun if we've got time."

And actually, I think that that needs [to be] challenged because imagination *is* a core skill from everything, from how you... what you're going to have for dinner tonight. You need to imagine it

¹ Full quote: "Give children a sense of wonder and stimulate questioning and ability to reason and test conclusions.", [Building the Ambition](#) (2014) p46

first before you cook it! From what you're gonna do at the weekend, you need to imagine it first - and the better your imagination is the more exciting that that is going to be. But also, from, you know, how do you build back an economy after a recession? Imagination is really going to help with that. That's a core thing! How do we transform our nursery settings to make them resilient spaces? Imagination is going to help with that.

And the more imaginative you can be - the more you value that, recognise and value that... because it is something that happens naturally - to go back to the numeracy like... [I] love numeracy [and] children would start... naturally begin to develop that.

But because we value that as a society and because we encourage that, you know, it's a really supported skill. Imagination, I don't think has [been] afforded the same luxury and - "creativity" is another word that we could use here for what we're talking about - so creativity hasn't been placed on that pedestal as something that is gonna really be one of the best tools that we have to have a really... the best future altogether.

It's, you know, it's just not a fluffy thing that we can push aside. It's something really core, but also, it's not just thinking about that... I don't like the idea that we're always trying to think about preparing small children for their future - they are, you know, beings not becomings. It's about having fun *today*, having the best experience that we can have this moment *today* together, not just like preparing you for the future.

Heather Armstrong (31:04):

Yeah. I absolutely agree with that. I know at Starcatchers, we have a big thing about, you know, it's not just about treating babies and young children as the audiences of tomorrow - they're audiences right now! You know, it's not just about putting down skills that, you know, will help learning later on - they're learning right now, you know?

There's a sense of respect I think to actually start and say - well, actually from, you know... from when you had a tiny baby, you're a person in your own right. Also, this is where children's rights can come in and all that as well. But to be able to respect where children are right now.

I mean... I do also think that, like or not, we're not going to be spending our life surrounded by people who do think that same way. So, it is useful to have those extra reasons in your back pocket as well. So, to be able to say actually - yes, absolutely, imagination is important now for lots of things, whether it's about escapism or fun or, you know, or, or problem-solving [and] it's also something that's going to help throughout their lives. So, if we, if we are able to help very young children develop their imaginations and get them kind of like strong and vibrant and wonderful when they're young, if we can keep that going, then that's going to be something that will help them through that whole lives.

Whether it's even if you're only thinking about learning, how do you - well, you can learn about things like history and molecular biology without having a really great imagination - but let's face it, it makes it easier! If you can imagine what it was like to be in those trenches or what it was like

to be in that French court, or indeed what it's like to see things that actually microscopes can't pick up yet, you know? If you can imagine that then the whole of learning becomes so much more accessible because you can make it relevant to you. Does that make sense?

Hazel Darwin-Clements (32:54):

Yeah. It's maybe important to acknowledge that imagination can be quite a scary thing as well? Like particularly having a good imagination [laughs] at the moment! And while you do have young children, it can be quite terrifying and I can see why a lot of people shut theirs off, you know? But I think on the most part it's a really useful and joyful space to inhabit – play, isn't it?

Heather Armstrong (33:30):

I also think that when you are facing difficult times, one of the best things that imagination can do is help lift you out of the moment and into what might be possible in the future. And I know we've kind of spoken a little bit about that. So if you could imagine - I'm letting you use your imagination - if you can imagine a post COVID world now, where are you hoping nurseries will be?

Hazel Darwin-Clements (33:55):

Ohhh! That's a really exciting question. There's a beautiful book that I recently read called *From What Is to What If* by Rob Hopkins and it's about the power of the imagination - but what like to say, what *if* what *if* all nurseries, all schools, all and communities had renewable energy as an income source for them? - there was an investment, you know, it's big thinking, but totally possible. I was just reading a case study the other day of a nursery that had solar panels which after you've paid off that initial output gives you an income and gives you some sort of resilience. In the summer holidays when nobody's using any energy, get a little bit of money to come back to!

What if, you know, they became centres in communities beyond just looking after the children or being childcare? What if they also brought communities together and projects, and perhaps even became places that had community fridges and places that could really help and support people with cloth nappies?

And what if every nursery grew stuff? What if they had, polytunnels - my dad's just built a polytunnel, well salvaged a polytunnel, - at my little brother's school and it's going to be a poly tunnel classroom.

Heather Armstrong (35:26)

Awww! Nice!

Hazel Darwin-Clements (35:27)

Yeah - so that they're actually growing and stuff throughout the year. But also, they have another space that's a sort of outdoor, sort of indoor... outdoor-indoor space that they can be in.

What if we had much more of our learning happening in wild environments - which are actual like woodlands and grasslands and things like that? And what if, you know, childcare settings became plastic free? So, you can see the theme that's emerging from my imaginings! That's something I've

been thinking a lot about.

But I think as well, what if creativity was valued and at the heart of it? What if imagination was really understood [and] explored? What if nurseries and childcare settings had green artists embedded in each setting? So, what if an artist was there to be an extra... “imager” of what’s possible, so that there was a constant specific, responsive to that setting, to those group of people had their own opportunity for somebody?

And, you know, the arts is struggling as well. So, we have a lot of really interesting people and you could get these amazing embedded artists in settings. So, these are some of the places that I’m thinking... but I’m going off topic. What do you think?

Heather Armstrong (37:10):

I’m going to be completely honest. I am such a practical person that I tend not to engage in too much kind of like blue sky thinking, but I know when I do it is really valuable. So, I do try and get to come back to that sometimes, but I’m always so interested in what’s possible. You know, I see all the kind of COVID regulations that are about – and all for very good reason - and I like to understand them so that I can say - but what is possible then? So actually, what can we do that’s safe right now?

And so, you maybe know that the International Festival have built some stages in school playgrounds that I’m assuming the nurseries will be able to access as well². I don’t know how many they’re doing, but again, I’ll put a link in to that information so people can see a bit more about it.

I’m really interested in saying: well, actually, even within these really restrictive times, how can artists work with settings in a way that’s safe? – genuinely safe – not “let’s just bend the rules”. Is it about being outside? Kind of virtual links? Maybe a bit of both? Is it about the Elf on the Shelf thing that we’ve kind of spoken about before – kind of leaving clues for people? - and then, you know seeing how that sparks imagination even if you can’t physically be with them?

But the reason I wanted to ask you about that kind of “what if” is because I think what you are really good at is seeing that really big picture and asking those really challenging questions. And the reason I love that is because even if everybody, or if a lot of people, are in kind of “survival mode” at the moment, and understandably; a lot has changed and, you know, things are changing little tweaks and pieces all over the place all the time - I absolutely recognise that’s a really challenging environment to be in – [but] if you can cope with that and then take one step out and say: “but what is possible within this?”, you know, “how can we protect creativity?” etc., etc.

But then if you can take another step back again and say, “well, actually what is possible post-COVID? What is possible? What’s our dream?” - through that conversation, you recognise your own values when you do that, don’t you? [For example] your values are very clearly through those kinds

² “Edinburgh International Festival invites young people to Play On by building stages in playgrounds”: <https://www.eif.co.uk/festival-guide/news-and-blogs/play-on-stages> (Aug 2020)

of environmental possibilities and sustainability and all those things, which are really wonderful.

But I think once you recognise those values in yourself, you can take a step back in to the “but what’s possible now” question and say “well, actually there probably are some things that we could be doing right now” - not just in that sense of survival, we’re dealing with really difficult situation right now - but to start to feel really positive about what you’re able to do within your own setting thing – whether that’s a nursery, or childminder, or out of school care or whatever.

So thank you so much for putting all those “what if”s out there, and I hope they spark somebodies imagination.

Hazel Darwin-Clements (40:06):

Well, I'd like to hear other people's “what if”s. I think that would be a really interesting sort of yeah... participation thing. If people could get in touch with us and tell us, you know, like their “what if” for where they are, what they would like, because we can all be having that conversation - it didn't cost any money!

Whilst it's a challenging thing to do, I think it's a really exciting and important thing to do, and we do stop ourselves - and that is really interesting, and partly it's because the world has lots of different types of people and lots of different types of brains, and we need them all. I am definitely somebody who has got the vision, but not the, you know, core, practical skills to necessarily get there [laughs]. This has been demonstrated to me in many unfinished projects around my house! But we need all different types of people, but yeah... that conversation can happen for free and it doesn't hurt anybody!

Heather Armstrong (41:08):

Let's do that. Let's do that. When we share this episode, we'll get some conversations happening on social media and, of course, we'll schedule some live Creative Chats with you as well for people to sign up to as well.

Hazel Darwin-Clements (41:23):

That would be so good!

Heather Armstrong (41:24):

So [we'll do that as] part of that as well - as well as getting, picking your brain for lots of more practical ideas.

Listen, thank you so much Hazel, this has been an absolute delight! It's always lovely to talk to you, but particularly during these times, when we all do probably feel a little bit more isolated, it's lovely to be able to reach out and have a genuinely creative conversation. So, thank you for that.

Hazel Darwin-Clements (41:45):

Thank you. It's really nice to hear lots of different people's voices as well. I think that's really

important at the moment - that's another conversation that we're all having, isn't it? So, I'd love to hear what people make of it all and be challenged on it!

Heather Armstrong (42:04)

Yeah, absolutely. Okay. Thank you, Hazel. We will put that out into the internet and see what happens, but you're absolutely right - I would love to hear from people as well, and we shall see where that conversation goes!

Hazel Darwin-Clements (42:16)

Speak to you soon.

Heather Armstrong (42:17)

Bye!

Catherine Wilson (42:19):

The Creative Skills Podcast was hosted by Heather Armstrong and our guest was Hazel Darwin-Clements. You can find out more about Hazel by visiting: www.hazeldarwinclements.co.uk

Every episode of our podcast comes with resources you can access online to continue the creative conversation and spark even more inspiration. To find this episode's videos, Reflective Practice worksheet, and sign up for a live online chat with Hazel go to www.starcatchers.org.uk/episode3

Our intro music is "Road Building" composed by Abigail Sinar performed by the RSNO for "Hup" in 2014.

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