

Outdoor Inspirational Learning Spaces

My name is Ali Irvine and I am acting manager of Claremont Children's Centre and I was invited as one of 5 children's centres to participate in the second OILS project. Being relatively new to the post at Claremont my initial reaction was one of real excitement. As an advocate of the Reggio Emilia approach to childhood and being fortunate to work with staff and artists from WEAVE Recycle at other times through my career I knew this was going to be a very valuable experience for the staff at Claremont Children's Centre and enable us to start to move together in a new direction. I think the WEAVE team have a great ability to facilitate staff to view things in a different way, to challenge their own thoughts and ideas on creativity and to the children's responses and the materials we offer them.

Seeing the team grow, as a manager, has been great for me. They have developed new ideas together and it's been the beginning of a long journey that will continue. You have to give staff, I think, the ability or rather the permission to think outside the box when you are working on a project like this. Let them take their own lead, to think for themselves, set challenges for themselves and for the children. It made me realise that the team at Claremont need to play and experience the child's world in order to really understand how they are thinking and how we can bring their learning forward even more.

I think for the centre it's about starting to think about working more closely with parents and carers of the children. Getting them to start to look at the things we offer children to play with and what our expectations are of their play. So hopefully I'm going to send family support workers out with new ideas for working with families in the home rather than them just taking home toys from the toy library. The idea that you can work with found and recycled materials is a really good one because it doesn't cost anything and they are available for everyone. So it's something I'm hoping to take out on home visits. Everyone has learnt that the open-ended way in which the resources lend themselves to children's imagination means that we can cover all areas of the children's development. This will help with our assessment and evaluation and planning for future activities.

I think what I have seen since the start of the project is not only are these resources out for the children but staff are starting to look at what we have with new eyes. It is interesting to see how now the children are more engaged with what's provided because it's been set up so beautifully with lots of thought of how the child might use it.

At Claremont we are now at the stage where we are thinking of how we set up and manage the outdoor space so that children have access all the time not just to the outdoors but to the resources that are out there. We are looking into storage and practical ways of doing that. One of the big things is looking at how we can work with the *stay and play* groups, getting the parents, not just the children to be outside, engaged and enjoying the activities. We really need to raise the value of this way of working with our parents.

It's all about the open-endedness of the natural and recycled materials. They really lend themselves so well to things like sorting, categorising and making patterns. There are all those learning possibilities that come out of exploration and investigation of these materials. It's just endless really.

Combining and exploring new materials. Just playing with little bits of clay, adding water observing the changes and then talking about it allows a cross over into CLL. The children are so surprised at what has happened and the discoveries they have made they are excited to talk about their experiences.

I think this way of working makes learning real for children. I have watched them play with a box of shells or a load of pebbles and create patterns. They haven't had to tell you because it so clear what they are doing. Within knowledge and Understanding you don't have to sit them down and see whether they can make a pattern because it all happens so naturally. That's why open-ended materials are so fantastic!