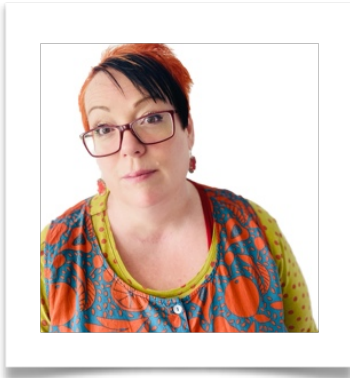


Materials Matter! Digging Deeper into Learning



My name is Debi Keyte-Hartland and I'm an associate consultant with Early Education and I'm a passionate artist-educator and pedagogical coach mentor interested in how children explore the world and develop their learning through engagement with materials of many kinds.

I have been pondering this quote below for many years:

"Materials become the tools with which children give form to and express their understanding of the world and the meanings they have constructed."

Cuffaro, Harriet K. (1995). Experimenting with the World: John Dewey and the Early Childhood Classroom. Teachers College Press.

Cuffaro (1995) here is telling us that children use materials as tools for their learning and development. I have wondered if this is so, what does this mean for us, as educators? I wonder how as educators we might:

- pay close attention to how our choices of materials connect and meet with the ideas and enquiries of the children and their ways of learning
- consider the different ways in which to propose and present materials to activate learning as well as communication and expression
- give thought to which materials might be richer in potential and intelligence that enable children to give form to their thinking



The materials we can curate and organise within the enabling environment is a key responsibility. As early years educators we are designing learning contexts to amplify, generate, and activate children's learning and development. It means that we must consider our provision and practice in intentional ways that anticipate the possibilities that

materials hold for children's developing their knowledge and understanding. It means paying

greater attention to the choices we make over which materials to have out, or not and to understand the ‘fan of possibilities’ that each material, or combination of materials might offer for children to construct knowledge and understanding with. In other words, it means more than thinking let’s just see what the children do with this choice of materials or let’s just see what children choose and like doing.

In Ofsted’s (2024), Best Start in Life part 3, it considers how children’s knowledge and understanding is ‘sticky’, in how children learn new things by making connections between one thing that they already know about and another; that their learning is “often urged on by their interests” and motivation, and that children’s creative and critical thinking does not exist within a vacuum. In other words, children need motivating and meaningful contexts in which they can play around with both their ideas and working theories and with concrete materials which engage with their senses as well as their thinking to create deep understanding of concepts, phenomena and the properties and affordances of materials within the world. It means exercising our own critical judgement as educators as to what constitutes as an activity that engages children in learning, rather than just keeping them busy. And this can be quite difficult when as educators we are constantly being seduced by activities for materials such as the latest idea for a tuff tray set up on social media. Instead, we must, be using our pedagogical approaches to ensure that teaching and learning takes place through the interactive process between children and their material environment. We can:

- **Attune closely** and be attentive to what children *can do* with materials and to find out what they currently understand about them. This will enable educators to plan and build on their learning in appropriate and meaningful ways, based in the knowledge and understanding they already have.
- **Consider the learning we want to see and encourage** – which means knowing our why and having in our pocket all the possibilities that materials offer to children for their learning and development so that we know how to interact effectively and when.
- **Create a community of collaborative learners** – where children can creatively play with materials together and which **we are present** and part of to encourage the children to share their ideas, communicate, plan and negotiate as they work together towards a shared goal.

To find out more about learning together with children and everyday materials explore the webinar “Making the Extraordinary Ordinary” available here <https://youtu.be/XGqhAK2-8kc> in which I explore how simple resources and materials such as paper and light can be used in your setting to stimulate joyful and playful opportunities that are rich and deep in learning.

There are also 3 free downloadable resources on the Early Education website dedicated to the Space to Flourish project that considers young children’s learning and flourishing with 3 key materials – charcoal, collage and the grammar of light and paper. These free resources can be downloaded and accessed here <https://early-education.org.uk/space-to-flourish/>



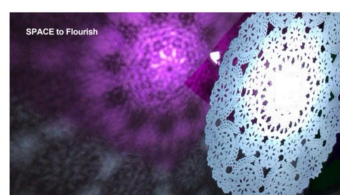
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