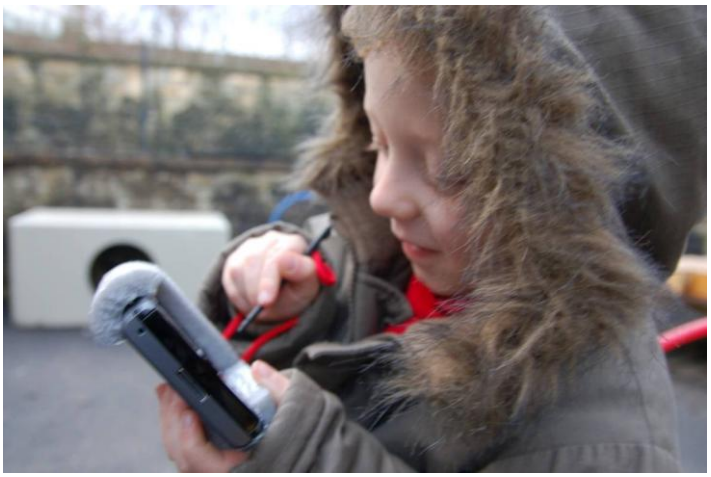
Dream Catcher



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The concept of Dream Catcher

- Dream Catcher is a tool which supports children in the early years to make video recordings and take photographs in order to share their thoughts, feelings and informal learning with their family at home and their practitioners at the early years setting. Dream Catcher aims to highlight the importance of child voice and showcase the multi-faceted, creative and playful ways in which children engage in self-directed informal learning.

Details of the Dream Catcher trials

- This research project was designed as an initial exploratory phase of Dream Catcher's development. It aimed to investigate the ideas informing Dream Catcher rather than to develop a prototype of the Dream Catcher tool itself.
- Digital cameras and PDAs were used as Dream Catchers and two-week trials were undertaken by two early years settings in Bath and Manchester in December 2008.

Findings of the research

The major findings of the trials can be grouped under three headings:

- **Benefits of the Dream Catcher concept**: Overall the trials demonstrated that the idea of Dream Catcher has considerable potential as a tool which can help explore children's informal learning, support child voice and facilitate the active role of the child in valuable three-way interactions between children, the home and the early years setting.
- **"Good idea; wrong technology"**: Research participants voiced strong support for the idea behind Dream Catcher. However, there were several difficulties experienced with the technology used in the Dream Catcher trials. Participants provided several useful suggestions for improvement of the Dream Catcher tool and these suggestions should be carefully considered in future development of the Dream Catcher project.
- **Dream Catcher as a child-centred approach**: Dream Catcher was found to be valuable in supporting creative and interactive child-centred approaches and practices in the early years.

Next steps

- The results of these trials suggested that the Dream Catcher concept has several important potential areas of benefit and that the project should therefore enter into a second development phase. This would involve working with parents, children and professionals to develop a simple and improved Dream Catcher device and a 'Dream Catcher package' of support and guidance to aid the introduction of creative and interactive approaches that enhance child-centred practice in early years settings and homes. Dream catcher would then enter into the trial environment to be refined and further developed. This is likely to require a longer and more in-depth trial taking place simultaneously in several early years settings.

INTRODUCTION

In January 2008, Futurelab put out a national call for ideas on the use of new technologies to support and showcase young people's informal learning. Futurelab invited submissions which would explore the following questions:

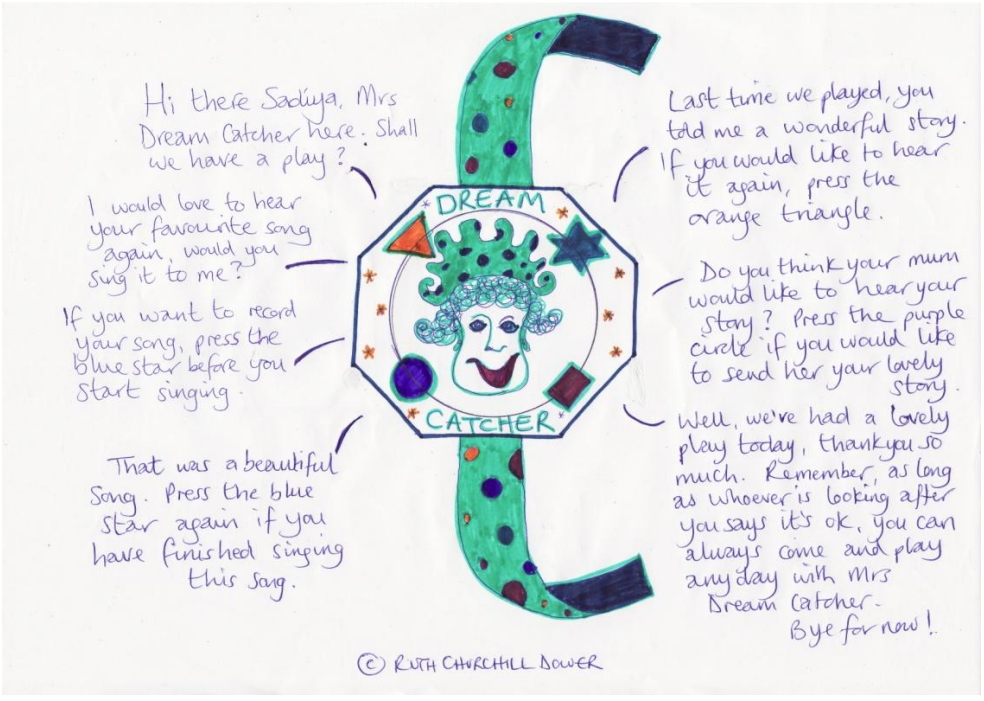
- How could we support young people to recognise what they are achieving in informal settings?
- What tools and practices could we develop to support young people to reflect upon and develop their out-of-school learning?
- How can we support educators to recognise, build upon and support children's informal learning interests?
- What tools and practices could enable young people to showcase their informal learning to their families, friends, employers or educators?

Over 100 entries were received and Dream Catcher, submitted by Isaacs UK, was one of only three to be selected for further exploration and development.

Dream Catcher is a tool which aims to support children in the early years to make video recordings and take photographs in order to share their informal learning between the home and the early years setting. In so doing, Dream Catcher also aims to highlight the importance of child voice and showcase the multi-faceted, creative and playful ways in which children may engage in self-directed learning. The original idea for Dream Catcher is summarised below and forms the basis of the Dream Catcher project.

Summary of Original Idea of Dream Catcher

This sketch illustrates the original vision of Dream Catcher



Dream Catcher is a 'magic' handheld device disguised as a watch that can capture young children's dreams by recording their creative play and imaginary worlds, opening up powerful channels of shared communication and learning with parents, other children, and early years professionals.

Dream Catcher enables children to share their inner worlds with family and friends, creating a collaborative and fun learning environment. Mrs Dream Catcher will ask the child to show her what they are doing / thinking / playing now. At the press of a button, the child records (using video, audio, or photography) their Dream Blog, ie their play, ideas, songs, dreams and stories. They can ask questions, make an observation, invent new games, or simply wonder out loud. The child can choose to show their family and friends what they have recorded, triggering opportunities for reflection and discussion. Or, the child could 'Beam their Dream' wirelessly to another watch-wearer, be it a grand/parent, child-minder, or friend, who can share in their children's play virtually. Parents will be able to download, catalogue and preserve those magic moments in their children's lives. They will observe how, and what, their children are learning from other areas of life, such as at nursery or pre-school. Children will feel a sense of confidence and well-being at having their own stories experienced in a meaningful way.

The idea is that the child's voice is not replaced by a complete video of their play, but that the recordings act as starting points, leaving space for the child to fill the whole picture in during their discussion (or acting out) with the adult. The Dream Catcher provides an opportunity for the adult to better understand the things their child is interested in, to encourage them to make space for special times together discussing these things that are meaningful for the child, to build the sense of respect, value and belonging in the child as a result.

In addition, the child can record their play at home, for reviewing back in their childcare or early learning setting. The Dream Catcher stays with the child wherever they go, enabling the sharing of insights between setting and home, into who they are both inside and outside of the more formal childcare environment. We are keen to explore whether this enables a more holistic approach to supporting the child's social and emotional needs, with more of a two-way transfer of knowledge about who the child is, what their interests, cultures, friendships and influences are.

This research project was designed as an initial exploratory phase of Dream Catcher's development and aimed to investigate the ideas informing Dream Catcher rather than to develop a prototype of the Dream Catcher device itself. Digital cameras and PDAs were therefore used as 'Dream Catchers' and trials were undertaken by two early years settings in Bath and Manchester in December 2008. These trials aimed to explore how the idea of Dream Catcher might work in real-world settings and how such an approach may be able to contribute to early years practice.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

While the idea of Dream Catcher has many potential areas of impact and benefit, for the purposes of this research study, there were three specific areas of focus. The three research questions below were developed as areas of focus for exploration rather than questions that the trials aimed to categorically or definitively answer. They were not intended to exclude the emergence of other interesting and useful findings and additional emerging findings are also explored in this report in addition to the issues identified below.

- How does use of Dream Catcher facilitate the expression of children's voices? This includes children developing their ideas of what it is they want to say, expressing and taking ownership of their own meanings, and being taken seriously by the adults they talk to in meaningful conversations. It also includes children's 'ownership' of the technology, and whether they feel they can use it to convey their own stories, ideas and feelings.

- How does Dream Catcher support links between home and the Early Years setting? This includes parents understanding the learning and significant experiences of their children in the setting, and vice versa. This should also take account of the child's active role in mediating and negotiating the transfer of information rather than an exclusive exchange between parent(s) and practitioners.
- How does Dream Catcher facilitate meaningful conversations between children and their parents and practitioners? This includes conversations about experiences, feelings, stories, ideas that are significant to the child. It should also take account of how the Dream Catcher project does or does not facilitate the child to take ownership of and explain their own ideas without over or misinterpretation by adults.

CONTEXT FOR THE PROJECT

The idea for Dream Catcher responds to extensive research and policy in the area of learning in the early years. In order to give an overview of the context for the project, this section discusses research and policy relevant to the ideas informing Dream Catcher and to the areas of focus set out in the research questions above.

a) Informal learning in the early years

The Dream Catcher concept was developed as a tool to highlight and explore children's informal learning. Informal learning can be understood as *self-directed* learning which happens outside or in addition to formal learning activities in educational settings. Informal learning is non-taught and can include both intentional learning and unintentional learning (Schugurensky, 2000). Sefton-Green (2004) suggests that the term 'informality' can refer to:

- the *location* in which learning takes place (for example, whether learning takes place inside an educational setting or outside of that setting)
- the *social roles* involved (e.g. the pedagogical relationships involved and the question of who is directing the learning)
- the *cognitive processes* and 'learning styles' involved (such as emphasis on factors like experimentation and play) (Buckingham, 2007: 25)

Informal learning is likely to involve a changed pedagogical relationship where the learner plays an active role determining the content of their learning, their preferred style of learning, as well as the meaning of their learning.

Many researchers point out that informal and formal learning should not be regarded as completely divorced from each other. Young children at home and in early years settings will be learning most of the time – some of this learning will be taught and directed and some will be more related to the child's own self-discovery. Indeed, because children in early years are so young, much of their learning may be informal as they explore the world around them and as they come to learn what interests them and is important to them. The Early Years Foundation Stage, through its focus on "a unique child" and "learning and development" encompasses a focus on the way in which individual children may engage in unique and self-directed forms of learning.[1] There may therefore be a considerable amount of children's learning in the early years which has significant informal attributes despite the fact that it takes place within the formal setting. In addition, a significant amount of informal learning will be taking place in children's homes and this learning may or may not be recognised.

[1] The Early Years Foundation Stage aims to set standards in the UK for learning, development and care of children from 0 – 5 years old and encompasses the four themes of a unique child, positive relationships, enabling environments and learning and development (www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/eyfs/site/index.htm).

A priority for research should therefore be to highlight the role of both informal and formal learning, to "explore their relationships, and identify their effects on learners, teachers and the learning environment" (Colley, 2003 :1). Many writers suggest that learning research has traditionally tended to focus on institutionalised participation in formal education or training and that informal learning can often be neglected and under-valued in policy and research as well as by practitioners and parents (Gorard, Fevre & Rees, 1999). Indeed researchers such as Tough (2002) liken informal learning to an iceberg claiming that it is barely visible above the surface but has the potential to make a huge impact in supporting education and learning as a whole. They conclude like many researchers that issues of informal learning should be subject to more attention in research, policy and practice (Schugurnensky, 2000; Colley et al, 2003; Gorard, Fevre & Rees, 1999). The research points to a need, then, to consider the impact of informal learning, to highlight its importance and to think about the ways in which it may or may not be able to connect to and support formal learning. As the writers above suggest, there are many different ways in which we learn and it is important to view these forms of learning as inter-connected and as equally valued aspects of each individual child's learning journey.

Dream Catcher provides a tool which may help to make these connections between formal and informal learning more visible – for young children themselves, for parents and for practitioners. It may also provide a vehicle for children to explore their informal learning and therefore to help parents and practitioners understand what children are learning outside of and alongside formal educational settings as well as within them.

b) Parental involvement and increased connections between children's homes and early years settings – benefits, barriers and issues

Linked to a more holistic focus on the child's whole life rather than simply their experiences within educational institutions, educational policy and research is increasingly focusing on the learning that happens within a child's family. Part of the motivation for this interest in family learning is to improve adults' education as well as children's learning, and to further the aims of social inclusion. Our focus here, however, is on the social, emotional and communications benefits for children of learning in the family and increased home-setting communication.

Much evidence suggests that children whose parents are involved in and support their learning achieve more highly than those who do not get this additional support (eg Desforges, 2003). Parental interest and involvement is clearly not a completely independent variable, and intersects with other variables such as parents' education level and socio-economic status. However, after controlling for such variables, parental interest and involvement, and the provision of a high quality home learning environment are still seen to be more significant factors than the quality of the school in predicting children's qualifications (Desforges, 2003; Duckworth, 2008; Melhuish 2008). Furthermore, this effect is even *more* significant for children from economically disadvantaged background (Duckworth, 2008).

The focus on family learning recognises the importance of parents "as children's first and most important teachers" (Alexander, 1995), and parents' role as children's educators is receiving much attention (Reynolds, 2005). It is important, however, that with this focus on parents' role as educators, that we do not open up new inequalities between children with involved parents and those with parents, who, for whatever reasons, cannot or do not support their children in these ways. Unfortunately it tends to be parents from already disadvantaged backgrounds who are less likely to get involved in their children's education (Sparkes, 1999); relying on parental involvement could therefore increase existing inequalities rather than reduce them.

It is also questionable how far parents should be expected to become 'teachers' in the professional sense of the word. In some cases, schools have asked parents to use very skilled teaching interactions with their children (Edwards and Warin, 1999) that

advantage parents with high skills levels and specialist subject knowledge over other parents. It is important that recognising the importance of parental involvement in children's attainment does not demonise parents, or work on an assumption of a 'deficit' model in which parents are measured against how far they live up to an expected norm of parenting. Parents who are not able to be more involved may feel stigmatised by educational settings and practitioners, and actually become even less involved as a result. Educational settings are also not necessarily always well placed to take account of the diversity of the parent population (Reynolds, 2005). This can potentially lead to a form of 'cultural imperialism' in which the setting imposes its own value system on parents (Dyson and Robeson 1999).

However, the potentially problematic issues that surround parental involvement are not insurmountable. By encouraging parents to get involved in learning *alongside* their children rather than taking on a teaching role (Dyson and Robeson 1999) and by taking a creative, low-risk approach to involvement (Safford and O'Sullivan 2008) parents may feel more able to involve themselves. Further, building on the learning practices that *already happen* within the home and recognising parents role in supporting their children's learning *as parents* rather than as additional teachers encourages involvement by recognising and building from what parents already contribute to their children's learning rather than requiring them to take on new roles and practices and focusing on their perceived deficits. This can lead to a more genuinely two-way communication between setting and home in which the diversity of parenting and home learning is recognised and valued within the setting. Thus, parental involvement needs to be seen both in terms of encouraging and enabling parents to take an interest and become involved in children's education, but also for school settings to recognise and value the less formal learning experiences that children engage within their families.

Given the evidence of the impact of parental involvement on pupils' achievement, increasing communication between home and educational settings to support parental involvement is a high priority for policy. There is evidence to suggest, however, that most of the communication is currently one-way – from school or setting to home (see, for example, Hallgarten, 2000; PPEL, 2007). Technologies are often used in this way; notably using text messages to inform parents of children's unauthorised absence (Becta, 2006) and using VLEs and websites to give parents access to current data about their child's progress (Becta, 2008). Rather than this one-way communication, many early years settings feel that it is important to respond to and build on the learning that, in whatever form, is going on at home; and to listen to and involve parents as much as to send information out to them.

The views and role of children themselves in home-school communication have so far largely been ignored in both policy and research (Reynolds, 2005). Not all children appreciate parental involvement at their setting and may not want their setting to encroach upon their home life. In moves to make transitions between home and settings more fluid it is important to remain aware of children's feelings about the boundaries and differences between home and setting, and to allow them to have an active role in managing parental involvement in the setting and setting involvement in their home life (Edwards et al 2007). Too many projects designed to enhance home-school relationships focus solely on communication between parents and teachers; it is time that the child's active and dynamic agency in this three-way relationship is acknowledged (Lam and Pollard, 2006).

Dream Catcher therefore aims to support children as active agents in making links between their early years settings and home environments; the idea is that the child is able to choose what, when and how to share their experience. The recordings will not in themselves capture the meaning of children's experiences, but aim to serve as a prompt for children to talk about issues of significance with their parents and practitioners. Dream Catcher, as a device 'owned' by the child, may therefore be able to foster more genuine two-way communication between the home and settings, with teachers learning about the home environment as well as parents learning about the setting environment.

By focusing on the child's agency in the relationship, and a more creative learning project, teachers, parents and children may be able to overcome some of the barriers to effective communication. If Dream Catcher is to support the child's active role in mediating communication between home and the setting, however, it is important that the child has control over whether, when and how Dream Catcher is used, and that their interpretation of the meaning of their recordings is respected.

c) Children's voice

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child enshrines the duty of governments to ensure that children have a right to express their views (Article 12), a 'right to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child' and a right 'to participate freely in cultural life and the arts' (Article 31). Children should be allowed to participate in decisions that affect them in a way that reflects their level of maturity. The importance of the UNCRC in UK education policy is seen in the way that it is integrated into and mapped against the Every Child Matters outcomes. (www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/_files/F1B3FBF728B196018E9616C71D0BF592.pdf).

Rudd et al (2006) argue that young people have a right to a say in their own learning experiences – both because this is a basic right, but also because this is likely to result in learning experiences that actually meet their learning needs. This argument has also been used to promote the involvement of children, and indeed all users, in the decision-making processes of designing learning technologies, projects and practices (Grant, 2008).

While it is unlikely that young children of three to five years will be able to participate in decision-making processes in the same way as adults and older children, this does not mean that their views should not be sought and taken seriously. Indeed, we would argue that it is adults' responsibility to support young children to explore and develop their ideas, express themselves, and take their views seriously. There is a wealth of research showing how it is possible to support young children to express their thoughts, ideas, hopes and fears (Clark & Moss, 2001; Thornton & Brunton 2007; Gussin Paley 1990, 1997; Druin 1999). There is a challenge both in supporting young children to express themselves and in adults sensitively interpreting children's words, marks and actions without imposing their own meanings.

Vivian Gussin Paley (1990) emphasises the importance of the stories children tell through play, showing how children often express deep and significant ideas and feelings through their play and story-telling. By allowing children the time and space to express themselves through play, she allows children to tell their own stories and express their own meanings. An important aspect of this approach is that the stories, and the meanings behind them, are 'owned' by the children themselves and not subject to adult translation and potential misunderstanding.

RAMPS (Lancaster, 2006) is a framework for listening to young children. This approach focuses on what it means to enable young children to make a positive contribution to their learning, social and/or health care following Every Child Matters. It provides a quality assurance framework around the following themes:

- **R**ecognising children's many languages – including the validity of sounds, talk, play, drawings as well as talk to express themselves
- **A**llocating communication spaces - providing physical, discursive and cultural spaces that encourage and support children's expression
- **M**aking time – giving children time to understand the question and consider their response
- **P**roviding choice – giving children genuine choices to make, to choose not to participate, and to choose how to participate
- **S**ubscribing to reflective practice – children and professionals critically appraising professional practice.

RAMPS provides a rationale for listening to children as well as practical guidance for including young children's voices in matters that concern them.

The original idea of Dream Catcher aimed to capitalise on the potential for new technologies to support the sort of practices described in Gussin Paley's work. In particular, the concept of Dream Catcher aims to provide a vehicle for child voice by allowing children to highlight the things that interest them and, when they wish to, to lead conversations with significant adults centred on the recordings they have made. The concept of Dream Catcher also recognises and responds to each of the requirements of the RAMPS framework for listening to young children.

d) Creativity in the early years

Creativity is subject to multiple, and often competing, definitions (Banaji et al 2006). In education, 'creativity' is variously used to describe cultural and artistic projects, creative approaches to teaching and learning, learning skills for employment in the 'creative industries' and ideas of 'everyday' or 'democratic' creativity that see us all as all continually engaged in creative processes (ibid). There is some consensus that creativity is necessarily a social and collaborative enterprise – we cannot be creative on our own (Loveless, 2002). Creativity and the arts are often seen as promoting a social inclusion agenda through emphasising the democratic and everyday nature of creativity and a mechanism for exploring and celebrating diverse cultures (Arts Council England, 2004). However, Holden (2004) argues for the importance of the arts to be seen as significant in their own right, irrespective of broader educational and social policy agendas.

UK government policy espouses an ongoing commitment to developing the creative abilities of young people and the Arts Council also make a strong claim for the place for the arts in education; both in economic and employment terms, in terms of young people's broader emotional and social development, and as a right to engage in creative and cultural practices of society (Arts Council England, 2004). EarlyArts sees creative and arts projects as significant for early years education, in supporting a child to "celebrate their own, and others', cultural identities, encourage their individual expression, and to do so within an environment of security, respect and belonging" (Dower, 2007).

Creative projects have been seen to have particular benefits for involving families in children's learning. A PPEL pilot project found storytelling to be a useful mechanism for encouraging creative talk between parents and children, and developing children's emotional resources (PPEL, 2007) resonating with the ideas put forward by Paley (1990) described above.

Perkins (1998) describes in more detail the benefits of creative practice which can allow children to:

- gain confidence
- learn new and hone existing skills
- express and Communicate their feelings and emotions, thoughts and ideas
- experiment with new ideas, techniques and materials
- develop their own sense of identity and individuality
- collaborate with others by supporting and participating in group activities
- develop a critical sense by questioning, making judgements and choices
- have fun, celebrate themselves
- stimulate participation from children with special needs.

Creativity is equally as important for early years workers, parents and carers because it:

- helps early years workers identify a child's skills and strong points, their favourite activities, and areas which need further development

- provides a non–threatening environment for early years workers to build their own confidence in exploring new techniques and skills
- provides opportunities for workers with arts skills to re-engage in creative work where previously constrained by the pressures of new initiatives or traditional adherence to a regimented approach
- provides opportunities to work alongside professional artists and build their own banks of skills, knowledge, ideas and inspiration to take back into the daily routine
- provides a focus for joint working between workers and parents
- increases parents' own confidence by offering fun and easy ideas through arts and creativity packs – an excellent trigger for language and literature development particularly with families without English as a first language
- stimulates joint child – adult learning environments at home, involving the parent/carer more in the understanding of and commitment to learning
- breaks down social barriers in the home, gets the family involved in shared activities but most importantly it gives the child a voice (Perkins, ibid).

Dream Catcher aims to foster creativity in the Early Years, supporting children to be creative in the expression of their own voice and supporting early years practitioners and parents to take a creative and interactive approach which features the child as an active mediator.

e) Play

Guidance on the Early Years Foundation Stage suggests that play can be used creatively to produce meaning and to increase learning. Play and exploration in early years settings means children are able to choose activities where they can engage with other children or adults or sometimes play alone, and during those activities they learn by first-hand experience – by actively 'doing'. In play, children can express their fears and re-live anxious experiences in controlled and safe situations. They can take risks and make mistakes, try things out and make sense of relationships." (DCSF 2007b; DCMS, 2006).

This is also supported by Meek (1985), who writes, "play helps children come to terms with the underlying meanings people in different communities share: 'The most strenuous period of imaginative activity is that time in childhood when we play with the boundaries of our view of the world: sense and nonsense, the real and the fictive, the actual and the possible, all within the cultural domain we inhabit." (Meek, 1985: 53)
In a recent conversation with Futurelab, Pat Broadhead, Professor of Playful Learning at Leeds Metropolitan University explained her research which focuses on learning through play, in particular how children become social and cooperative players. She distinguishes between social play, in which children are playing together, and cooperative play, which is deeper and in which children are focused and engaged, there is problem-setting and problem-solving activities, and language development. She takes a Vygotskyan approach, seeing social and cooperative play as fostering learning, especially when playing with 'key' or 'expert' players, who can model or mediate their co-players' learning through scaffolding in the zone of proximal development.

Broadhead characterises play on a continuum of types of social play investigating what factors in an educational environment inhibit or facilitate social and cooperative play. She highlights the role of metacognition during play: children are able to reflect on their play while they are playing. They will briefly step out of role to drive play in new directions, eg 'if we put this there, then it can be this, and we can…'

She also stresses the importance of open-ended play suggesting that spaces and props for open-ended play facilitate more cooperative play than strongly themed areas that provide a ready-made shared set of norms in which to play. More open-ended play spaces, including water, sand, bricks, and open-ended role playing resources, required children to negotiate with each other how they are going to play, which gives rise to

more cooperative play. One child called such a space the 'whatever you want it be place'. Broadhead's research took place in a context supported by 'playful pedagogues', practitioners who were highly experienced in facilitating play and understood the learning benefits of play, and in which play was highly valued and understood as such by children.

She suggests, however, that adult intervention can often reduce the quality of play, causing children to move away from cooperative play. This is because, as an outsider to the play, adults do not share the history and context of that play, so children have to stop and recap and explain themselves, rather than continuing in their play. This is not specific to adult intervention, but about the difficulty of an outsider involving themselves in play. Outsiders who attempt to join in play without understanding the shared play context may well be excluded as the players don't want to interrupt their play to induct a new person.

Child and adult 'expert players' do manage to join shared play, however, when they follow entry cues. These often take the form of a period of observation, standing on the periphery to understand what's going on, then beginning to join in, perhaps by passing someone a resource, such as a lego brick or role playing prop. They may then be invited to join the play. Broadhead encourages practitioners to follow these cues, rather than to drive the agenda by asking children to 'explain' their play through asking questions such as 'what shapes have you used here' that are at odds with children's play language and break the flow of play.

Dream Catcher is a device which recognises the important role of play in children's lives and may allow children to communicate their experiences of play to parents, friends and practitioners. This is valuable for its own sake, in increasing parent and practitioner understanding of children's experiences and learning and also in helping children to learn by reflecting on their play as a means of expression. Dream Catcher could have a role in revealing the importance that children place on play to significant adults.

f) Use of technology in the early years

There are several issues which need to be considered, as well as several areas of controversy, surrounding the use of technology in the early years. UK children (0-5) have access to wide range of media and technologies and recent research undertaken by Marsh et at has suggested that parents are generally positive about media use in children's social, emotional, linguistic and cognitive development. This research suggests that young children are growing up in a digital world in which they are developing a wide range of knowledge, skills and understanding of media from birth, with family members mediating this process through their own social and cultural practices. Children between 0-5 years old experience, on average, 126 minutes of screen time per day. (Marsh et al, 2005).

Recent research on digital exclusion has illustrated that extensive contact with digital technologies is by no means universal (eg CLG, 2008). However, the increased presence of technology in young children's lives has led some commentators to express concern about technology's potentially negative effects (Wartell & Jennings, 2000). Some of this concern about children's exposure to technology may be due to the fact that technology as currently used in early years settings in the UK is used mostly to introduce 'key skills' rather than to foster greater interactivity or creativity or to provide a vehicle for child voice (Aubrey & Dahl, 2008). Technology may therefore be viewed negatively as a factor which decreases children's contact with other children and adults.

In their collection of three papers outlining perspectives on early years and digital technologies, Eagle et al (2008) suggest that more attention needs to be given to the way that technologies can be used creatively to increase interaction with and between children in the early years. They argue that "the interactional dynamics of intimate shared moments between children and adults around shared artefacts is clearly key....

Yet the design of educational technology seems to overlook such issues, and, even in the research world, little is written about this, with some important exceptions" (Eagle et al, 2008: 34). They suggest that "what is missing in the design of much software for the early years is an awareness that learning derives from a process of interaction with both the social and the physical world, with parents and teachers being key actors in children's learning experiences" (Eagle et al, 2008: 37).

Dream Catcher aims to address this tendency for research, policy and design to overlook the way in which educational technology can be designed to facilitate greater interaction between children and between children and significant adults. It is important to emphasise that rather than Dream Catcher encouraging decreased contact between children and adults, the idea of Dream Catcher is an example of where the use of technology may be able to increase interaction and support meaningful and creative conversations between children, parents and practitioners. The Dream Catcher project therefore aims to provide a technological tool to encourage and support creative and interactive practice with digital technologies in early years settings.

TRIALLING DREAM CATCHER

In order to explore the ideas informing the further development and use of Dream Catcher, a short two-week pilot trial was designed to take place in two early years settings in December 2008 – Hallam Road Children's Centre in Manchester and St Saviour's Nursery and Infant School in Bath.

a) Technology used

Rather than building a full prototype of Dream Catcher at this stage, it was felt that it would be more beneficial to design a preliminary trial exploring the concept of Dream Catcher using existing technology. The results of this trial could then be used to inform potential further developments of the Dream Catcher idea.

The trials therefore involved the use of digital cameras and PDAs. A prototype Dream Catcher application was created for the PDAs which featured a small dragon character which was called the Dream Catcher

When children used the PDA stylus pen to tap this character they were taken to a screen which offered the choice of either making a recording or seeing a recording, and an audio soundtrack giving these choices was also triggered.

If the children chose to make a recording they could either take a photograph or set the PDA to make a video recording. The digital cameras did not involve the use of a Dream Catcher character but were used as standard cameras and video recorders. Both PDAs and cameras featured play-back functionality so that children could review and share their recordings.

St Saviour's Nursery and Infants School in Bath was provided with both cameras and PDAs and parents were given the choice between these two technologies. In Manchester, Hallam Rd Children's Centre was provided only with PDAs.

b) Details of the trials

The Dream Catcher devices were left with the settings for two weeks and it was intended that the devices would move between settings and children's homes and that children would be able to share and discuss the recordings they made at home and at the setting with both parents and practitioners for the whole of this period. The trials involved two to three 'focus' children from each setting who would take the 'Dream Catcher' devices home with them every day. In addition, general Dream Catcher devices were provided for all children to use within the setting. The focus children were selected by the early years settings, and the settings made the initial approach to parents and children asking them if they were interested in being involved. In Hallam Road Children's Centre in Manchester three focus children took part in the trials. In St Saviour's Nursery and Infants School in Bath, there were two focus children involved.

In Hallam Road, the trials took place in a Nursery context and at St Saviour's in the school's reception class. In each early years setting, initial meetings were held before the trials began with the practitioners and parents to explain the purposes and practicalities of the trials. At the beginning of the trials both parents and practitioners were given packs giving further details regarding how to use the devices, including some suggestions for how they might introduce Dream Catcher to the setting or the home. Parents and practitioners were asked to allow the children to decide when and how to use the Dream Catcher to make recordings. Researchers encouraged parents and practitioners periodically to prompt children asking "shall we make a recording of this?" but it was stressed that using the Dream Catcher should not be regarded as 'homework' and the decision about whether to make recordings and what to record should lie with the child. Parents and practitioners were also asked to review the recordings on the Dream Catcher devices each day before they were sent home or to the early years setting to ensure that these recordings were appropriate for others to see. If they deleted recordings, they were asked, where possible, to discuss this with the child.

In the Manchester early years setting, a range of practitioners worked with children in the Nursery class using the Dream Catcher devices. In St Saviour's in Bath both the reception class teacher and the head teacher held discussions with children during the Dream Catcher trials. In children's homes, the Dream Catcher devices were used with

parents (both mothers and fathers), as well as with siblings and, in some cases, extended family (mainly Grandmothers and Grandfathers) and family friends.

c) Data collection methods

Data collection involved the use of research diaries as well as extended final interviews with parents and practitioners. Researchers also visited the two early years settings during the course of the trials to observe and record the children using the Dream Catcher devices and the recordings which the children made throughout the project were passed on to researchers. The research diaries, however, were used very minimally by both parents and practitioners.

GENERAL DISCUSSION AND EMERGING FINDINGS FROM THE RESEARCH

There were several important initial findings that emerged from the trials at both St Saviour's Nursery and Infants School in Bath and at Hallam Rd Children's Centre in Manchester and these are detailed below.

The trials at Manchester had to be largely abandoned after only a few days due to technological problems with the PDAs (detailed below). At St Saviour's, too, the PDAs were used for only two to three days. This setting, however, had also been provided with digital cameras, and these were used much more successfully. One focus child from St Saviour's, Noah, used the camera throughout the trials to take and share pictures with parents and practitioners. The other focus child from St Saviour's, Summer, stopped using both the PDA and the camera after only a few days. Despite technological difficulties, however, practitioners and parents from both settings voiced significant support for the idea behind Dream Catcher.

a) Introducing the Dream Catcher devices to the setting and integrating their use into daily practice

Practitioners reported that they found it fairly easy to integrate Dream Catcher into their daily practice. This may be because both settings were already interested in promoting a culture of listening within the setting. St Saviour's Nursery and Infant's School have been part of the long-running 5x5x5=creativity project, which is based on the child-centred Reggio Emilia educational approach from Northern Italy[2]. Practitioners at this setting had therefore been using digital cameras as a method of documentation and reflection for some time. They were interested to see, however, how this practice could be enhanced by allowing children, rather than practitioners, to take photos. The trial settings had, in many ways, already embedded the sort of approaches that inform the Dream Catcher project which was helpful in achieving a seamless introduction of Dream Catcher into the settings. It may be more challenging to introduce the Dream Catcher concept to a setting which may not already be committed to such an emphasis on creative and interactive child-centred approaches.

A package of guidance for early years settings could therefore usefully be developed to aid the introduction of the Dream Catcher concept into early years settings, and to support the sort of creative and interactive child-centred approach which the effective use of the Dream Catcher tool requires.

b) Use of the Dream Catcher devices in the setting

Within the Bath setting, the Dream Catchers were mainly used during the children's 'discovery time,' (although they were available throughout the day) and pictures were

[2] www.5x5x5creativity.org.uk

then viewed and discussed with the children in the setting during a period of review taking place at the end of each day. In terms of what the children recorded in the setting, the practitioner reported that in general there were a lot of blurred and posed shots. She commented that "everything was special – they wanted to take photos of everything."


Photographs taken by children with Dream Catcher Devices within the Bath setting

In Manchester, where the trials took place in a Children's Centre, the use of the Dream Catcher devices was less structured (reflecting the way in which the Children's Centre is often able to embrace more flexibility than in a Reception class). Practitioners at Manchester reported that, when they were able to overcome the technological difficulties and use the device, the children took photos mainly of themselves within the setting. There was one child who used the device only to repeatedly record circle time and songs and was not interested in using the device at other times. This suggested that there may be something particularly meaningful about these times to this child. The limitations imposed by the poor quality of the PDA technology, however, meant that it was not possible to explore this issue further.


Using the Dream Catcher Devices in the Manchester setting

Initial findings regarding the use of Dream Catcher devices within the settings suggested that, where they were able to use the devices to make recordings in the settings, most children were somewhat indiscriminate about what they recorded. Dream Catcher was used differently in the two settings and it may be that any support and guidance which is developed around the use of Dream Catcher needs to be targeted to particular types of setting and age groups. It would also be useful to see the results of a longer and more in-depth trial which would provide more detail about how children use the Dream Catcher devices within the setting.

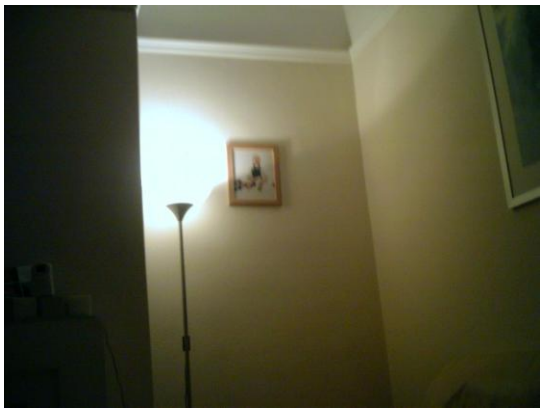
c) Use of the Dream Catcher devices in the home

There were variations in the way that children responded to and used the Dream Catcher devices in the home. The mother of one of the Bath focus children, Noah, reported that one of his favourite things to take photos of whilst outside of the setting was the back of the car and that he took "endless pictures of his feet in the air." Noah himself, when asked what he would take photos of if he could take photos of anything in the world, said he would take photos of Africa ("because I have never been to Africa") and the tubes on the inside of his belly (but "I'd have to swallow a little man with a camera first"). The other focus child in Bath, Summer, only took part in the trials for a few days but the recordings received from her device were mainly of objects in the outdoors such as swans and trees, along with several photos of her sisters (suggesting she had been using the device with siblings). Although the researchers were unable to talk to Summer's dad about the project, practitioners at the setting felt that Summer had stopped using the device because it did not work very well outside and in low lights. Summer's dad was interested in photography and owned a high-spec camera and his frustrations about the limited functionality of the digital camera provided were thought to explain why Summer stopped using the device in the home.

Photographs taken by children from St Saviour's Nursery and Infant's School whilst outside of the early years setting

Practitioners in Manchester reported that they had seen limited footage from the children's homes. When children and parents had managed to make the devices record at home, the poor quality of the PDA recording software made it difficult for either children or practitioners to recognise what their recordings represented. However, interviews with parents confirmed that families had tried to use the devices in the homes. One of the focus children, Eva, had four siblings and she used the Dream Catcher with her brothers and sisters. Another of the focus children, Scarlet, used the device with her extended family, with her Grandmother (herself a former head of an early years setting) being very much involved in the trial.





Photos taken by children from Hallam Road Children's Centre whilst outside of the early years setting

Children appeared to be more selective about what they took photos of whilst in the home or with their families than they were within the setting. Towards the end of the trial, patterns were beginning to emerge with individual children taking photos of particular kinds of objects or events. This suggests that the concept of Dream Catcher may be helpful in allowing children to highlight to parents and practitioners the sort of things that are preoccupying them outside of their time in the early years setting. Again, therefore, it would be useful to undertake a longer and more in-depth study to gain more substantive information about how different children may make use of the Dream Catcher device outside of the early years setting.

d) Technological issues

There were several technological issues which arose during the Dream Catcher trials and the PDAs were found to be almost impossible for the children to use. Children often accidentally closed the Dream Catcher application and then were unable to re-open it without assistance. It was also easy for children to open other applications over the Dream Catcher application which they did not know how to close. This meant that children needed a prohibitive amount of adult intervention and support in order to use the PDAs and often became frustrated whilst trying to make them work. In addition, the PDAs took very low quality photographs and videos and could only be used effectively in bright light. There were several occasions when the video function failed to record despite the presence of a light indicating that the device was recording. This caused disappointment when children or parents thought they had captured particularly special moments. Eva's family, for example, were disappointed when they took the Dream Catcher on holiday with them and were initially pleased that they had recorded parts of the holiday only to find that the devices had in fact failed. The PDAs also regularly froze or showed error messages meaning that they needed to be rebooted. In combination, these factors meant that, despite their best efforts, neither setting were able to use the PDAs for the full two week period.

The Manchester setting was only provided with PDAs and these technological problems therefore had an especially severe effect on the trials at Manchester. Although the technological problems caused frustrations, parents and practitioners at Manchester continued to voice support for the idea of Dream Catcher. Eva's mother, for example, felt that these were "just teething problems with the project" and that with different technology, Dream Catcher would prove to be a good concept that could help parents interact and build up a good relationship with early year settings. A common theme emerging from interviews with participants in Manchester was "good idea, wrong technology."

There were fewer technological problems experienced with the digital cameras although some children found it difficult to access the play-back option and one of the focus children in Bath found it frustrating that the immediate review of the picture only stayed on screen for a few seconds. Very little use was made of the video recording functionality of the digital cameras and it may be that children found this difficult to access. In general, however, once the children had learned to use the camera, and how to keep it still, they could use it with very little intervention or support. Participants who used the digital camera during the trials, however, felt that future developments of the Dream Catcher device need to be simple and robust and should be easier to use than a standard digital camera.

More work therefore needs to take place on the form which the Dream Catcher devices should take and their future design. The results of the initial trials suggest that the use of PDAs should be abandoned and that further developments should focus on the development of a robust and simplified Dream Catcher tool or on making use of already existing camera technology.

e) Children's perceptions of the devices

Children at both settings responded in different ways to the Dream Catcher devices. The practitioner at Bath reported that Noah, one of the focus children carried his Dream Catcher (in this case a digital camera) with him wherever he went. The head teacher at the school commented that Noah 'really loved' using the device, and seemed to find the concept of making recordings 'funny' – it made him laugh to take and share photos. Noah's mother also confirmed this, saying that Noah loved using the camera so much that she was considering buying one for him to use at home. In Manchester, Eva's mother felt that the Dream Catcher had caught Eva's imagination and noticed that Eva often tried to use it even when it was not working. The practitioners at Hallam Road confirmed this, commenting that "Eva loved it and carried it around everywhere."

Another child, Scarlett, however, was less impressed with the device. Both Scarlett's Grandmother and her parents reported that Scarlett "didn't really get on with" Dream Catcher and "just wasn't interested in it." Whilst she had initially been attracted by the device and she enjoyed the Dream Catcher character, she was frustrated with the technological problems and found the foam casing unappealing and therefore soon lost interest.

Some children felt a strong sense of ownership over the devices whilst others were less interested in them. This suggests that, as would be expected, different children will respond in differing ways to future Dream Catcher developments. This may be due to their individual preferences, their differing experiences with the devices, their differing levels of familiarity with the devices or the differences in PDA and camera technology (and the fact that using the cameras did not involve navigating an unfamiliar application). This is something which should be considered and further explored in future developments of the Dream Catcher device and in any further trials.

f) Participant's perceptions of the benefits of the Dream Catcher idea home-setting connections

Parents and practitioners at both settings emphasised the value they placed on the idea of increased interaction and connection between home and early years settings and thought that the idea of Dream Catcher had significant potential to support this.

Child voice and child-centred practice: Practitioners at St Saviour's Nursery and Infants School thought that Dream Catcher could be a useful tool for enriching a culture of listening within a setting or a child's home. However, staff emphasised that the Dream Catcher device alone could not achieve this. Instead, he felt that it was the specific child-centred practice which the device suggests, in combination with a general commitment to promoting child voice within the setting, which had the potential to make important contributions to facilitating the expression of children's voices and child-centred practice.

Remembering and sharing informal and formal learning: The practitioner at St Saviour's commented that one benefit of Dream Catcher was that it provided a tool to help children to remember their learning and then to share it with others. She was interested in using this idea further in her practice as part of daily reflection as she felt that children in the early years sometimes found it difficult to reflect upon their learning.

The immediacy of capturing visual images: Practitioners and parents at both Bath and Manchester felt that the visual images captured by Dream Catcher were useful in their immediacy, and in retaining children's interest as well as in allowing parents to see what had happened in the early years setting. Both parents and practitioners felt that children would not react as well to recorded audio as they found the process of visually being able to see themselves exciting and interesting.

There was considerable support for the idea of Dream Catcher from participants in these trials. Participants felt that there may be significant benefits from introducing the use of Dream Catcher to early years settings and homes and the trials therefore suggested that Dream Catcher project should enter into a second phase of development

g) Dream Catcher as an object of play rather than a device to record play

In both settings the Dream Catcher devices were used more as an object of play, rather than as an object to record play or to record the telling of stories. Although children did use the devices to make recordings these recordings were not of play or stories as had been originally envisioned when the idea for Dream Catcher was developed.

When they visited the Manchester setting, for example, researchers observed that the focus children were engaging in role play as grown ups, Scarlett in particular pretending to use the PDAs to take notes just as she had seen her Mum do. Accordingly, one of the focus children at Manchester, Eva, took exception to the foam covering which had been provided in an attempt to protect the PDAs and removed it. Eva was concerned that the Dream Catcher should look as 'real' as possible so as to more effectively engage in her role play.

In Bath, Noah's mother felt that the Dream Catcher itself had become an object of play, and that it was very hard for Noah to step outside of that in order to conceive of the Dream Catcher as an external object he could use to record his play or stories. When she had suggested that he try to record play or stories, those play or stories that he had been involved in had immediately stopped and the play had instead become about the Dream Catcher.

The way in which Dream Catcher became an object of play did not detract from children's ability to use Dream Catcher to record the things that interested them. It does, however, suggest that if Dream Catcher is to be used to record children's story or

play, this would require the development of specific story and play-based practice in early years settings (in addition to child-centred practice in general). Future developments of Dream Catcher should work with children, parents and practitioners to further explore whether Dream Catcher should have a focus on play and story-telling and, if so, how early years settings can be supported to embed this approach into their daily practice.

h) Finding ways to manage the time required to use Dream Catcher effectively

The practitioner at Bath found that it was time consuming to respond to all of the children's questions about the Dream Catcher devices and to assist with the various difficulties they experienced whilst learning how to use the devices. This was particularly true in relation to the PDAs due to the technical difficulties detailed above. The devices had been introduced to the children in small groups at the beginning of the trial and by the end of the two week period the children in the setting were just learning how to use the cameras whilst the focus children who had had more access to the devices were very competent in their use. The practitioner felt that given time all of the children in the setting would have been able to use the cameras with a minimum of supervision and she would have been interested to see how this ease of use would have affected the way in which the children used the devices and what they made recordings of. She therefore expressed on several occasions that she wished she had had more time to devote to the project and that she would have been interested in the results of a trial which took place over a more prolonged period of time.

The head teacher at St Saviour's confirmed this, feeling the Dream Catcher would be impossible to manage if all of the children in a class of thirty were able to take a device home with them. This was not just in terms of the activities required to make Dream Catcher a success but also related to the practicalities of processing the images, reviewing them and finding time to discuss them. He suggested that in order for Dream Catcher to be successful, a simple robust 'dream catcher' device (or devices) would need to be based in the early years setting which would then act as a roving device(s) with children taking it in turns to take them home.

Whilst it may be valuable for individual children to have more one-on-one time with significant adults (and indeed this may be one of the benefits of Dream Catcher), early years settings and parents may need support in managing the time spent on Dream Catcher. It may be that a Dream Catcher device more like the original conception would be less time consuming than the use of digital cameras or PDA technology. Future development of the Dream Catcher tool should take this into consideration and should include the production of a package of support and guidance which would provide early years settings and parents with tools and techniques for the effective use of Dream Catcher.

i) Suggestions for development and improvement

Participants in both Bath and Manchester made many suggestions for how the Dream Catcher tool could be developed and improved. These are reproduced below.

- The headteacher at St Saviour's felt that Dream Catcher should be regarded as a "project rather than an object." He suggested that there were many creative approaches that could be taken within settings themselves to the process of developing the personality/character side of the device. The children could be involved in developing the character, a puppet could be used to introduce the device, children could also be involved in decorating the device or the device bag and this would create a feeling of shared ownership for those children. He suggested that the Dream Catcher could consist of a basic and robust technological device and a supportive package of materials which would be provided to early years settings and would include guidelines on methods for the children to customise their dream

catcher and information on creative and interactive child-centred practice and on more effective sharing of information between home and setting.

- There was general agreement that the Dream Catcher device needed to be as simple as possible and some suggestion that a simplified and basic digital camera or simple video recorder such as FLIP might be sufficient[3]. Both parents and practitioners suggested that the Dream Catcher tool should have a maximum of three buttons (a play button, a record button and a stop button).
- Staff felt that not only did the device need to be kept simple but so did the process of introducing the Dream Catcher concept. Both settings encouraged their practitioners to continue to try similar projects, but advised on keeping the use of Dream Catcher simple to allow the process to grow from small beginnings.
- Several participants suggested that the Dream Catcher device should be waterproof.
- One parent suggested that Dream Catcher needed to be easy to point in the right direction to make recordings – it had been difficult for her child to understand that she needed to turn the PDA device around in order to make recordings.
- The experience of one of the focus children indicated that Dream Catcher should have a longer review period after a photo had been taken.
- One child's parents suggested that the device should be colourful and bright. They also suggested that a way should be found "to make it a bit special" so that it was more appealing to children, such as decoration with stickers, fabric or beads.
- Almost all participants commented that they would have liked the device to have better functionality outdoors and in low light.
- Although children enjoyed playing with the Dream Catcher character, some participants felt that the idea of a 'dream catcher character' was incidental to the idea of the Dream Catcher as a whole.
- Practitioners felt that on the PDA Dream Catcher application the blue button for 'make a recording' and the green button for 'see a recording' were too similar in colour and should be made more distinguishable.
- Some of the Dream Catchers were provided with a chord so that the child could hang the device around their neck and carry it round with them. Some parents at Hallam Road Children's Centre in Manchester felt that this presented a strangulation risk and asked for the cord to be removed. They felt that if the Dream Catcher was to be attached to the children, it may be better for it to be in the form of a wrist watch.
- The practitioners in St Saviour's where Dream Catcher was trialled in a reception class thought that it may be easier to integrate Dream Catcher into a nursery setting where there are more adults in the classroom.
- It was generally thought that a trial over a longer time period would be more beneficial.

These suggestions for improvement have the potential to significantly improve the Dream Catcher tool and should therefore be taken into consideration in the future development of the Dream Catcher device and concept.

EXPLORING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1) How does use of Dream Catcher facilitate the expression of children's voices?

Many of the children felt a very strong sense of ownership of the Dream Catcher devices and by the end of the trials there were perceptible patterns in what children were making recordings of in the home. This suggests that children had clear ideas about what they were interested in recording and were beginning to use the Dream Catcher devices as a vehicle for discussing these things. All trial participants agreed that the idea

[3] www.theflip.com

of Dream Catcher, in combination with a commitment to child-centred practice, was valuable in providing a vehicle for the expression of child voice.

2) How does Dream Catcher support links between home and the early years setting?

When asked what she had learned during the project, the practitioner in the Bath setting reported that she had learned more about the way in which Noah learns. Watching Noah use Dream Catcher had made her realise how "kinesthetic Noah is in his learning" and that "a lot of his learning comes from himself and from fiddling around with the camera on his own." The head teacher felt that he now knew much more about Noah's extended family than he did before the project began (he was, for example, able to name people important to Noah such as 'Grandpa Beard' and other family members and friends). This suggests that Dream Catcher, along with the sorts of practices which the use of Dream Catcher requires, may have an important role to play in helping practitioners to learn more about the children in their care, to find out more about their home life and to better understand how they learn, including being aware of their self-directed and informal learning.

Noah's mother also reported that she found Dream Catcher helpful in learning more about what happened during his time at the early years setting. She felt that it was often difficult to get a good idea of what children were doing whilst they were away from home during the day and that seeing photographs and video recordings had the potential to make parents feel more involved in their children's learning. Since the Dream Catcher project finished, St Saviour's have continued using digital cameras in the classroom and have provided monitors facing out to the playground so that parents can find out more about their children's day when they are waiting to pick them up at the end of the day. Again, this suggests that Dream Catcher can provide a helpful method of sharing information about the early years setting with parents.

The practitioners at Hallam Road Children's Centre were interested in being involved in the Dream Catcher project because they wanted parents to be able to see what children had done in the setting. They were interested in the way that Dream Catcher may be able to provide a three-way exchange of information and they hoped that Dream Catcher would encourage parents to contribute to the setting's understanding of the children's learning and create partnerships between parents and the setting. When interviewed, they agreed that the idea of Dream Catcher had potential to achieve this.

All those who participated in the research felt that it was possible to use digital cameras or other similar devices to aid effective and meaningful connections between children's homes and early years settings and that there were important benefits to be gained from such practice.

3) How does Dream Catcher facilitate meaningful conversations between children and their parents and practitioners?

Researchers observed a wide-ranging and in-depth conversation between Noah and his early years practitioner which was prompted through discussing Dream Catcher and encompassed discussion of what people looked like on the inside, what it might be like to live in Africa and what Noah wanted to be when he grew up. In this case, Dream Catcher prompted the kind of practice that allowed Noah to discuss issues which interested him and encouraged him to think further about those issues. The head teacher confirmed that he had had conversations with Noah that he would never have had without the prompt of the photographs. At other times, however, both parents and practitioners reported that they did not feel that they had the time to engage in these conversations with children although using Dream Catcher did have the potential to prompt such discussions.

The trials therefore illustrated that Dream catcher can encourage the kind of practice in which meaningful and child-centred conversations take place between children and practitioners and between children and parents. The recordings can provide important prompts, helping children to remember and think about what has happened at their setting or home. The use of Dream Catcher does not automatically facilitate 'meaningful' conversations, however, but can provide a valuable support for such conversations where adults are already committed to the importance of in-depth discussion with the children in their care.

SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

The three major findings from the initial phase of Dream Catcher trials can be summarised as:

1) **The Beneficial Potential of the Dream Catcher Concept:** Overall the trials demonstrated that the idea of Dream Catcher has considerable potential as a tool which can highlight and explore informal learning, support child voice and facilitate the active role of the child in valuable three-way interactions between children, the home and the early years setting.

2) **"Good idea; wrong technology": PDAs and the design of Dream Catcher:** Many participants in the trials suggested that their experience could be summed up with the phrase "good idea, wrong technology." This was particularly true of participants' experience of using the PDAs. Participants felt that even the cameras, however, could be simplified. The trials therefore suggested that more attention needs to given to the design and form of the Dream Catcher device as a tool and careful consideration should be given to participants' suggestions for improvement. This design process should bear in mind, however, that the primary value of Dream Catcher is in encouraging creative and interactive child-centred practice rather than as a piece of technology in and of itself.

3) **Dream Catcher as a type of child-centred approach and practice:** The beneficial results of using Dream Catcher were not perceived as flowing directly from the use of the technology itself but rather from the child-centred approach and practice that its use required and supported. This suggests that Dream Catcher could include a package of support and guidance, along with tools and techniques, provided to early years settings and homes to aid the effective use of the Dream Catcher tool and to enhance child centred approaches.

The results of the present trials therefore suggest that the Dream Catcher project should enter a second development phase. This would involve working with parents, children and professionals to develop a simple and improved Dream Catcher device and a 'Dream Catcher package' of support and guidance to aid the introduction of creative and interactive approaches that enhance child-centred practice in early years settings and homes. Dream Catcher, as a device and practice, would then enter into the trial environment to be refined and developed. This is likely to require a longer and more in-depth trial taking place simultaneously in several early years settings.

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FURTHER READING

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See also:

Canterbury Nursery and Children's Centre: www.canterburycc.co.uk/meaning.php
Report on a long-term project at Canterbury Nursery and Centre for Families and Children to explore the impact of a more creative curriculum on children's achievement. The project employed artists to come in to work with children under the guidance of a 'creativity working group' and the report is aimed at promoting good practice and identifying the main principles for designing a creative early learning programme. The project identified seven key themes including stories and photography. The report argues that photography can be an "excellent means of communicating with parents in a really positive way," can be a "crucial medium when there is no common language" and "can remind children of a previous experience. In relation to stories, the report suggests

a firm link between playing and storytelling and the project aimed to encourage children to tell their own stories rather than solely listening to stories being read to them.

Listening to Young Children produced by Coram Family, is a comprehensive resource to support practitioners' understanding of what it means to include the voices of young children, and to respond to what young children have to say. The pack contains an introductory guide, a Reader, a Practitioner Handbook, and 11 individual case study booklets. There is also a CD-Rom which includes audiovisual material to illustrate the case studies. Published by Open University Press/McGraw Hill Education (2003). www.mcgraw-hill.co.uk/html/0335213723.html

'Listening as a way of life' leaflets (updated 2008)
Published to complement the training on Coram Family's Listening to Young Children: A Participatory Approach resource. Each leaflet contains details of research, practice and methods that work with young children from birth to eight. These have been revised in 2008 to include references to the Childcare Act 2006, EYFS and to update the resources The six 'Listening as a way of life leaflets' are:

- 'An introduction to why and how we listen to very young children' by Alison Clark (www.ncb.org.uk/dotpdf/open%20access%20-%20phase%201%20only/revised-listening-intro_2008.pdf)
- 'Listening to young disabled children' by Mary Dickins (www.ncb.org.uk/dotpdf/open%20access%20-%20phase%201%20only/revised-listening-disabilities_2008.pdf)
- 'Listening to babies' by Diane Rich (www.ncb.org.uk/dotpdf/open%20access%20-%20phase%201%20only/revised-listening-babies_2008.pdf)
- 'Supporting parents and carers to listen: a guide for practitioners' by Julie McLarnon (www.ncb.org.uk/dotpdf/open%20access%20-%20phase%201%20only/revised-listening-parents_2008.pdf)
- 'Are equalities an issue? Finding out what children think' by Nicky Road (www.ncb.org.uk/dotpdf/open%20access%20-%20phase%201%20only/revised-listening-equalities_2008.pdf)
- 'Listening and responding to young children's views on food' by Ann-Marie McAuliffe with Jane Lane (www.ncb.org.uk/dotpdf/open%20access%20-%20phase%201%20only/revised-listening-food_2008.pdf)