

Encouraging curiosity, developing potential

Recently, six primary schools from across the country gathered at Ironmonger's Hall in London for the MakeBelieve Arts' Curiosity Conference 2017. Now in its third year, this one-of-a-kind event is shaped by the pupils' imaginations. The conference is specifically geared towards giving children a platform to imagine, entertain and articulate their own musings and unanswerable questions, with pupils from other schools, taking it in turns to deliver keynote speeches.

Here, Simon Collis, phase leader and English subject leader at Emmaus Catholic and Church of England Primary School in Sheffield, explains how the conference offers a unique opportunity for pupils to explore their imaginations and develop their ideas into comprehensive debates and, in turn, helps to nurture important life skills and experiences.

At Emmaus, one of our main aims is to nurture all of our pupils, while encouraging their aspirations and potential, to ensure each and every child is achieving academically, and developing as an individual. It was this ethos that perfectly aligned with the Curiosity Conference because it gives pupils that attend the opportunity to stretch themselves and talk about something they have a real interest in, all while developing important skills and abilities that they will need in the future.

In the run up to the conference, pupils worked with a member of the MakeBelieve Arts team to come up with some initial ideas and curiosities. The children were encouraged to ask questions about different subjects such as food, nature and daily activities, and from this, began to cultivate their thoughts and interests through writing paragraphs and working in teams to delve deeper into subjects, before each pupil worked out their main "what if..." question. From here, pupils developed their idea to form a comprehensive and coherent discussion which they then turned into presentations to be delivered at the conference. For example, one "What if..." began as "What if sausages could dance?", which eventually became "What if sausages danced in your stomach after you've eaten them?"

Giving pupils the chance to be creative and develop their own individual ideas is not only empowering for them in supporting their learning, it's also really exciting. It was wonderful to see how enthusiastic the children were to explore their ideas, create a presentation on

their curiosity and practise it in advance of the conference too; I saw their confidence, speaking and listening, literacy and perseverance develop rapidly even before the event!

When the day of the conference arrived, the pupils were so excited, not only to meet the other schools and deliver their presentations, but also to visit London! The Ironmonger's Hall itself left the children in awe, with one pupil, Maisie, saying she "felt like a queen" when she saw the sparkly chandeliers, flags of different countries all around the hall, and a grand stage.

The event began with a keynote speech from children's author Sally Gardner (whose books were very popular with the attending children), before the pupils took to the stage to present their curiosities. It takes a lot of courage for a grown adult to deliver a presentation to a large audience, let alone a child, but at the conference, although slightly nervous, pupils from all the schools were outstanding, speaking with confidence and proud of their ideas. They listened intently to all the wonderful, creative and, of course, curious ideas from their peers, and the array of thoughts on display really showed just how individual each pupil is. It emphasised the importance of nurturing imagination and curiosity during childhood, and why we really need to let pupils work autonomously to build their own ideas.

The children were beyond thrilled to attend the conference and were standing ten feet tall afterwards! For me, the highlight was seeing all our pupils' hard-work paying off when they delivered their presentations and, in particular, seeing one of our pupils who is quite shy delivering a brilliant speech. Although all pupils shine when given this chance, it's the pupils that surprise you in ways you couldn't predict that stand out.

The pupils haven't stopped talking about the day and it's safe to say they've benefitted hugely from the whole experience; for example, we're doing a topic on Romans at the moment, and the pupils keep asking lots and lots of questions, which is fantastic, and shows how the conference has piqued their curiosity.

Another teacher who attended the conference was Kate Ramage, a Year 5 teacher at St John's Church of England Primary School in Durham, and she has also seen her pupils' inquisitiveness grow. "The children have become more curious about the world around them and ask more questions. It's been a huge learning experience for our pupils, and has helped them to become independent learners and thinkers, which is an incredible life skill to have!"

The Curiosity Conference is a truly remarkable – and special - experience for everyone who takes part. It not only develops fundamental life skills, such as confidence and teamwork, but it also gives pupils the opportunity to develop their curiosity and their own ideas; it's this and the questioning that's so important because we don't always prompt them to follow their ideas and chains of thought. With imaginations that are rich with creativity and ideas, pupils must have the opportunity to delve deep into their minds and explore their own potential!

For more information, visit www.makebelievearts.co.uk/curiosityconference

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