

# **Playful Pathways of Enquiry...**

**Navigating the Immersive Learning  
Landscape with Punchdrunk Enrichment**

## **Executive Summary**

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## Executive Summary

The Immersive Learning Collective (ILC) was an ambitious three-year teacher development project exploring the application, and evolution, of Punchdrunk Enrichment's practice in 18 London schools between 2019 and 2023.

Punchdrunk Enrichment is an independent charity which sets out to create transformational theatre for education, community and family audiences. It builds upon the success of the world-leading immersive theatre company Punchdrunk in order to take the company's innovative practice into communities and schools. Through its sensory and immersive installations, Punchdrunk Enrichment transforms environments in schools into fictional worlds in which students play active roles in shaping narrative and engaging in problem solving. They also create teacher-led projects which provide the resources and guidance schools need to set up miniature installations in classrooms, and to maintain episodic adventures with children.

The charity was established in 2008 by Peter Higgin, a founding company member of Punchdrunk, and now Artistic Director and joint CEO of Punchdrunk Enrichment. Tara Boland was Associate Director from July 2016 - Nov 2021 and led on the development of teacher-led projects during the ILC project. Joanne Skapinker joined Punchdrunk Enrichment in 2018 and is the Immersive Learning Producer for the company.

## Project Rationale

Recent evaluations have demonstrated that Punchdrunk Enrichment's techniques offer engaging and transformative experiences for pupils, making them more receptive, motivated and engaged with their learning (Cremin et al. 2015; Colvert, 2018). They also reveal that the company's development work with teachers has had an impact on pedagogical practices in school settings (Cremin et al. 2015). However, Punchdrunk Enrichment recognised the need for more longitudinal partnerships with schools which would help them to explore how their signature pedagogies (Thomson et al, 2013) might be adopted and adapted in school settings in meaningful and sustainable ways.

To enhance the value and longer-term impact of their educational projects they worked with a group of committed teachers, and Dr Angela Colvert, to develop and fine-tune a professional development offer that would provide a trajectory of support for teachers, to help maintain momentum and embed key principles. This endeavour was driven by values related to social justice in ensuring schools in areas of economic deprivation, whose cohorts were experiencing significant social disadvantage, could access high quality arts experiences. It was also driven by the desire to support teachers to see themselves as creative people who could facilitate moments of joy, magic and wonder in their classrooms.

Punchdrunk Enrichment had previously built partnerships with schools who had hosted some of their installation projects, such as their flagship schools project *The Lost Lending Library*<sup>1</sup>. The aim of the Immersive Learning Collective, then, was to deepen existing relationships with known schools and forge new ones with those unfamiliar with their work.

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.punchdrunkenrichment.org.uk/project/the-lost-lending-library](http://www.punchdrunkenrichment.org.uk/project/the-lost-lending-library) for more details.



## Phase 2: Co-design (September 2021-July 2022)

The second phase of the ILC provided an opportunity for Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) teachers to develop a new teacher-led adventure with Punchdrunk Enrichment, *The Wishing Cupboard*, and pilot this with their classes. The in-school staff training (INSET) in this second year focused on creating detailed backstories for imagined worlds using a map of 'Weevillania' and specially created dice (see fig. 2), both of which were carefully designed by Punchdrunk Enrichment to bring previous Punchdrunk Enrichment projects into a new imaginative frame, and to provide new spaces for these to develop.

Punchdrunk created an 'origin story' of Weevillania to share with teachers containing rich description of the fictional space. It explains that 'all these shops and places can exist both in Weevillania and your world. Portals open up momentarily and offer a view into this strange and wonderful land.' Each school on the ILC was creatively included as a fictional location which often reflected some element of the schools' names. For example, a school with 'Mount' in the name was represented as a Mountain. The map served as a 'boundary object' functioning as a bridge (Akkerman and Bakker, 2011) during training (which connect the real space and with the imagined realm). During termly ILC meetings, teachers shared practice and developed new ideas through iterative processes of planning, making, playing, and reflecting.



**Figure 1:** Teachers generating origin stories using the map of Weevillania [Photographer Credit: Paul Cochrane]

## Phase 2: Independent Design (September 2022-July 2023)

In the final year of the ILC, Punchdrunk Enrichment developed the metaphor of The Bothy Club to encapsulate and communicate the mission of the Immersive Learning Collective. This Bothy also appeared on the map of 'Weevillania'. A bothy is a hut which can be found on the sides of mountains or other wild spaces, where a traveller might need to seek refuge and shelter during their journey. They are free to stay in, but it is expected that travellers leave them as they found them or leave behind something to support or sustain future travellers who might need the space.



The ILC Bothy Club was both a metaphorical and physical space which manifested whenever teachers met to plan or reflect on immersive learning experiences. The teachers were, not only cognitively engaged with the professional development opportunities, but also in embodied affective ways. It provided a dedicated and protected time for reflection, playful experimentation, collaboration, and exploratory learning. It provided shelter for the community of teachers but also became a collective resource of materials and ideas that were developed, shared, and maintained together (including teacher-led-projects, mythical narratives, and creative rituals to frame learning).

The purpose of The Bothy Club was to bring ILC members together through a fictional frame which positioned teachers as a community of playful explorers and provide a support network for those entering what Pete Higgin termed 'the imaginative wild'. This phase culminated in a marketplace being set up (as if it had arrived from Weevillania) to share and showcase the projects that had been developed in school settings, with other members of the ILC and invited guests (See fig. 3).



**Figure 1:** Sharing ideas and inspiration at the 'Market Place': a final celebration event for the ILC [Photography Credit: Paul Cochrane]

## The Research Design

This research, although longitudinal in nature, was designed in three phases which aligned with the phases of the ILC program. It was led by Dr Angela Colvert who was based at the University of Roehampton for phases 1 and 2 and at the University of Sheffield for Phase 3. In the final phase of the research, the team expanded to include Dr Lisa Stephenson from Leeds Beckett University as co-investigator. In discussion with Punchdrunk Enrichment the following questions were developed, to shape the research design.

- What is immersive learning?  
How is 'immersive learning' conceptualised, enacted and embodied by artists and teachers and how does this change and develop as the project progresses?

- What is an immersive teacher?  
How do artists and teachers navigate the commonalities and differences in their pedagogical approaches (and are new practices forged as a result of this process)?
- What is an immersive curriculum?  
How is the process of 'co-creation' conceptualised, enacted and embodied by artists and teachers and how does this change and develop as the project progresses?
- What is an immersive school?  
How are the successes of the creative partnership 'defined' and 'valued' by participants (including artists, children, teachers, headteachers)?

A range of qualitative data was collected over the three phases of research. These included:

- Interviews with three case-study teachers across three schools in each phase of the research. Senior leaders from case-study schools were also interviewed about their motivations and experiences during the ILC.
- Observations of all the ILC Meetings, Collective Conversations and teacher-led project development workshops with teachers were undertaken across all phases. The INSET sessions in case-study schools were also observed in Phases 1 and 2 and sample observations of mentoring sessions in case-study schools were undertaken in Phase 3.
- Teacher Reflections were recorded during each phase of the research. Discussions were audio recorded and written reflections were also collected during ILC meetings and during Collective Conversations. Case-Study teachers in Phases 1 and 2 kept reflections relating to three focus children during the teacher-led adventures: *Codename Atlantis* and *The Wishing Cupboard*. These reflections were pseudonymised and shared with the researcher.
- Texts produced during teacher-led projects were also collected during the project, including a creative task for teachers which was set in Phases 2 and 3 in which they recorded significant moments during the ILC (using photography, audio recordings, films, or written notes).

Analysis of data focused on the teachers' conceptualisations and embodied enactments of immersive play, and on the pedagogical practices that evolved during the process. Analysis of qualitative data was iterative over the three phases of the project and involved the development of codes and themes. Thematic analysis was applied across all datasets which were cross-referenced and coded descriptively and then inferentially (Miles and Huberman, 1994) to ensure the rigour and reliability of findings.

## Discoveries and Impact

Returning to the key questions we set out to explore, this summary highlights the significant findings and impact of the ILC on teachers, curriculum design and schools.

### What is immersive learning?

This research set out to understand the characteristics of immersive learning, as experienced and defined by teachers. This report highlights that Immersive learning involves a process of navigating playful pathways of enquiry, both as a collective and as individuals. It is a process driven approach, rather than solely focusing on outcomes, and foregrounds the emergent and evolving learning journey of participants. It centres participants as agents of change, within a fictional frame, and supports them to engage in

imaginative and physical transformations of spaces and practices. This approach is often described by Punchdrunk Enrichment, and teachers, as bringing 'magic' into classrooms, providing portals into imagined worlds. The embodied nature of immersive learning was understood by teachers through playful and 'affective inductions' into Punchdrunk Enrichment's practice.

This experiential approach to teacher development was highly significant for participants, and often supported teachers to experience awe and wonder and joy themselves (as adults) and to better understand the significance of these for children in their classes. Manifesting this feeling of 'magic' was an affective and relational experience that was shaped in the moment as teachers and children explored spaces and materials together to create and shape playful mission-based learning opportunities.

### **What is an immersive teacher?**

The ILC positioned teachers as 'playful explorers' who immersed themselves in embodied and sensory practices with children, as co-learners. The teachers were committed to exploratory learning as professionals, engaging in a 'journey of discovery' with colleagues and with the children in their classes. Facilitating immersive learning opportunities required teachers to be responsive to children's suggestions and contributions as well as the materials and spaces they were engaging with.

Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) teachers felt that Punchdrunk Enrichment's playful approach was aligned with their daily practices and professional training, whereas some teachers in KS1 and KS2 initially found that it was less aligned with their initial teacher training and more linear and traditional teaching approaches. Nevertheless, by the end of the three phases teachers across all Key Stages had begun to develop and sustain their own 'immersive styles' of teaching and noticed the impact of this on themselves and their professional identities.

### **Impact:**

- Teachers who participated in the ILC meetings felt empowered to 'unlock their creativity' and many who were involved over the three phases reported shifts in their self-perception relating to identifying as creative people.
- Teachers collaborated with their colleagues when developing and piloting projects, and worked best when they worked in teams and partners.
- Teachers felt 'looked after' and nurtured when attending ILC meetings, particularly the face-to-face events and this made them feel more confident and assured when making changes to their school curriculum that sometimes felt risky or daunting.
- All teachers who engaged in the ILC were able to use their current practices as a starting point for developing new immersive learning projects, whether that be introducing a 'moment of magic', a new 'mythical ritual' or developing a more sustained mission-based project.
- Teachers reported developing a trust in themselves and being more confident in their ability to take risks, experiment and adapt their practices based on their knowledge of the children in their classes and their responses to prior sessions.

### **What is an immersive curriculum?**

An immersive curriculum was understood by teachers to be socially and environmentally situated, leading to localised learning opportunities. In order to develop an immersive curriculum, teachers needed to consider the way their experiences of time shaped their approaches, requiring responsivity in-the-moment, planning for play, and sustained school development. Developing immersive learning began with a mythical narrative context (to provide a fictional frame) and a playful mission-structure or ritual (which positioned children as heroes who needed to engage in collective problem-solving and imaginative engagement).

- By the end of Phase 3, schools had begun to embed immersive learning in their yearly curricular planning. This included looking for opportunities to create ‘moments of magic’ and ‘mythical rituals’ as well as longer, more sustained mission-based projects.
- Senior Leaders and staff recognised the importance of iterating projects, in response to world-events, children’s needs, curricular priorities and teachers’ individual styles of teaching.
- The ILC prompted teachers to reflect on the tensions between the exploratory approaches to following and responding to children’s interests, which are more established in the EYFS, and the more linear approaches to planning which teachers routinely undertake in later key stages.
- The teachers valued the flexibility of immersive learning projects and the scope to tailor sessions to meet the needs and interests of their classes.
- Teachers felt that the teacher-led projects, which they had co-designed with Punchdrunk Enrichment, provided a valuable context for developing the children’s spoken language, as well as imaginative engagement, and attributed this to the increased motivation to share their ideas and experiences. Examples of this included children using longer phrases in EYFS, and children in KS1 and KS2 being more willing to express their ideas.
- Teachers also noted shifts in children’s desire to engage in writing. For example, EYFS teachers observed children making increased effort to include initial sounds and greater detail in their drawings, as they were invested in the fictional frame and ‘purpose’ of the mark-making. KS2 children spontaneously suggested the need to write in different genres such as letters and lists.
- Children were keen to physically engage with the magical transformations of spaces and materials and began to use classroom resources creatively to make their own artefacts. In the EYFS this contributed to the development of their fine motor skills. In KS1 and KS2 whole school projects often required children to create texts and explore school environments to further missions.
- The teacher-led projects encouraged children to use the school environment in new ways to support learning, often bringing new groups of children together to share ideas and play together in and around the location of installation spaces.
- Teachers felt that it was easy to align the outcomes that arose with EYFS curriculum objectives, particularly those related to Communication & Language Development (C&L) from Personal, Social & Emotional Development (PSED).
- The teachers began to explore immersive learning projects as a way to launch the start of a new academic year, to support the children and teachers to work together as a team and to create a shared experience for the class.

## **What is an immersive school?**

An immersive school is a value-led community of practice, which provides teachers with permission to engage in creative risk-taking and develop playful immersive pedagogies at every Key Stage. An immersive school sees giving children access to arts-based learning opportunities as an important part of ensuring their communities have equitable access to creative learning opportunities, linked to the lived experiences of children and families.

### **Impact:**

- Senior Leaders were key to sustaining the immersive work in schools and demonstrated their commitment through investing funds in the ILC over three years (at a time when budgets were extremely tight). Leaders gave permission for teachers to engage in the ILC development programme, offering their support. Many leaders also actively engaged in multiple ILC meetings.
- There was a high degree of professional trust within the ILC schools built on strong relationships with senior leadership, supportive networks, and faith in the power of Punchdrunk Enrichment’s approaches to immersive learning.



- Although only representative teachers from each school were involved in the ILC meetings and collective conversations, they were given opportunities to disseminate ideas to the broader teaching teams through staff meetings. In the first and second phase teachers were able to attend a whole-school INSET session with Punchdrunk Enrichment artists.
- By the end of Phase 3, children within ILC schools were able to participate in immersive learning projects across multiple year groups, due to projects being embedded in medium term plans and teachers looking for opportunities to integrate 'moments of magic' across the curriculum.
- Some schools actively reached out to community groups and donors who were keen to support the work, as exemplified by artefacts donated to one school initiative called The Museum of Everything. Further projects which actively reach out to and include families and communities as part of the adventure could usefully be developed further in future years.
- A 'creative ethos' was evident in all schools, and senior leaders saw the ongoing relationship with Punchdrunk Enrichment as a way of sustaining and developing a culture of creativity in their school settings.

## Key Contributions

During the ILC, Punchdrunk Enrichment provided an 'affective induction' into their practices which was effective in supporting teachers to transform and adapt their pedagogies to meet the needs of their school communities. This affective induction enabled teachers to tackle challenges, was value-led, and positioned teachers as playful explorers. This experiential knowledge exchange led to hybrid pedagogical practices which merged Punchdrunk Enrichment's pedagogical approaches with those more typical of primary school settings, and supported teachers to develop their own 'immersive styles' of teaching.

In the final phase, the development of The Bothy Club provided a highly innovative and creative framing to support teachers to adapt their professional practice and explore the potential of immersive learning in schools. The Bothy Club functioned as a driver of change and a 'call to arms', providing an imagined as well as a physical space for teachers to share and develop new approaches to immersive learning. Together participants navigated pathways of enquiry raising and exploring key questions and experiences related to their affective experiences: 'Why? (Sense of Purpose) When? (Sense of Time) Where? (Sense of Place) Who? (Sense of Community) How? (Process) and What?' (Outcomes). These helped to shape the playful pathway of enquiry that the teachers and artists followed together.



## Recommendations

To continue to build on the successes of the ILC and to extend the legacy and impact of the work, the following actions could be usefully undertaken:

- Continue to develop the range of teacher-led adventures that can be used by teachers in schools, as they help to provide scaffolding for teachers less familiar with Punchdrunk Enrichment's approaches.
- When piloting new teacher-led projects with teachers, try to ensure that year-group teams can work and plan together so that the co-design of the project is more closely aligned with school curriculum development practices.
- Develop digitally accessible, affective experiences, to help teachers to understand the work of Punchdrunk Enrichment. For example, VR experiences might support teachers to 'peek into' the installations created in other schools and provide inspiration and 'affective induction' into the work.
- Create stronger links with Initial Teacher Education programs, and Education MAs. For example, developing a MOOC on immersive learning practices would provide a useful induction resource for teachers.
- Provide digitally interactive, and affective, case studies of practice which can be shared with educational practitioners and policy makers.
- Join with others championing creative learning, by sharing practices at national and international education conferences.