

Giant steps for very young people

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A new theatre package offers professional development to teachers and parents. Brian Hayward reports

For some people, continuing professional development was the way forward almost before they knew its name.

As a classroom teacher at Moorfoot Primary in Gourock, and then director of its music and drama programme for nursery and early stages, Grace McElvie had relished the work of the visiting arts groups. At the same time, she realised that many colleagues lacked the confidence or skills to capitalise on their value. Her secondment as Inverclyde's arts education co-ordinator gave her the chance to do so.

She was keen to begin with nursery schools. "There is so much already being done for primary and secondary schools, but that was the chance to catch them young! To give them their first theatre, a really good interactive experience," she says. "I had seen Giant Productions at work and I knew right away that their gentle, inter-personal style was exactly what I was looking for. Luckily, they could include us in their November tour."

Giant is the all-inclusive, multi-sensory theatre group, and it came to Gourock to set up its Ceilidh Tree and its starlit woodland in the pre-5 centre at St Columba's High.

Last week, it gave seven performances, watched by all eight Inverclyde nurseries and a Primary 1 class. The company describes its performance as a "magical sensory treat". It is very much the brainchild of director Katrina Caldwell, who also leads the post-performance CPD.

Incredibly, for the youthful age of the audience, the production held their attention for all 50 minutes. This absorption was sensitively earned. The children were drawn in by wonder, and then amused, concerned and interested by a meandering narrative that constantly turned up gentle surprises as it introduced them to the menagerie of animals and birds that live around the tree, all realised as animated puppets.

Its other strength was Vivienne Grahame, the solo performer. Moment by moment, she engaged with each child in the audience, telling her stories and singing, brushing them with the owl's wings, spraying them with water from her fluffy white rain cloud, laying her slimy slug trail across their knees.

She interacted with the children, accepting and using their reactions. WC Fields said "never act with animals or children"; Grahame does both: she is a poet and has taught stand-up comedy for a decade.

At the end of the day, Katrina Caldwell conducted the CPD session. She confesses to being surprised by the richness of the resource she had created. Nevertheless, she delivered a two-hour session crammed with ideas from the performance that could lead the children into movement, song-making and social education, and much besides. She supplies full notes on the activities, and the schools also get a resource pack.

Each participating class was invited to send two teachers and two parents to the session, and the project held the parents particularly important.

The take-up in Inverclyde was enthusiastic; the parents, Ms McElvie said, "jumped at the chance, and I was delighted because it is vital for parents to see how their children play. They learn through play. I want parents to play better with their children".

CPD budgets are never large enough, and Inverclyde was only able to afford this admittedly "expensive" project by packaging the cost with two partners, Rikki Payne, the creative links officer, and Sheena Beaton, quality improvement officer for early years and primary. Ms Beaton was happy to take up the theme of the importance of the parents and the home.

"Parents," she says, "need to see how children learn, so they can take it forward at home. Learning at home and in school is a partnership. The difference is that obviously parents are only concerned with what they can explore with their own child; teachers, on the other hand, are looking for ways to make whole projects out of these ideas."