

Making a song and dance about it: The Plan Bee project

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The story of Plan Bee begins with an academic seminar that was held in a small room at the University of Leeds in the summer of 2018, when I was in the midst of my PhD research examining the entangled lives of humans and bees. I was lucky enough to be given an hour or so to take my audience deep into the world of bees, introducing them to the great diversity of species which share the name of 'bee' and outlining how we have become entangled with the decline of many bee species, seen as both perpetrators and resistors of harm. During the seminar, I paid particular attention to the work of artists and creatives who have found inspiration in bees, recognising their role in telling

the bees' story and engaging people with information about how we might pay attention to the needs of bees.

Attending this seminar was the choreographer and contemporary dancer Ruby Portus. This was Ruby's first introduction to knowledge surrounding bees and, as she later told me, it planted a seed of inspiration in her mind that she felt intrigued to follow through in her own artistic practice. By 2021, Ruby had pursued her vision to combine her dance practice with my academic interests, and successfully obtained funding to create a dance show and storytelling workshop – Plan Bee – for primary school-aged children to explore the lives and struggles of bees.

To develop Plan Bee, we took inspiration from innovative research in environmental psychology and neuroscience. It details how we need to tell stories that go beyond just helping people imagine and understand what is happening, and which actively develop people's capacity to take on environmentally conscious actions connected to specific issues.¹ Research shows that once people begin engaging with pro-environmental actions, their impetus to continue engaging in the world in an environmentally conscious way develops.^{1,2} Working with children, this means we might imagine and produce stories showing them the opportunities they have to take action in environmental



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issues, being mindful of their capacities as children and the limited agency they have with adults.

In developing the story about bees through the show, I led a continuing professional development (CPD) session with those involved in the project, guiding them through critical knowledge about bees and exploring previous creative, storytelling projects on the subject. As well as examining science, traditions, and practices connected with bees, we discussed fictional stories such as *The Bees* by Laline Paull and *The History of Bees* by Maja Lunde; theatre shows such *Me & My Bee* by the collective ThisEgg; and more exploratory creative works such as the musical piece and installation work *Bee Composed* by the sound artist and composer Lily Hunter Green.

Through dance, song and dialogue, we told a story which brought bees' struggles alive to children, engaging them with the fictional tale of a young bee called Bibi who is trying to find her purpose but struggling to do so in a world where flowers are scarce and pesticide use is impairing her capacity to forage. Since it is important to engage the children with a hopeful story,³ we ended the show on an optimistic note, with the bee deciding on her purpose and finding a wildflower meadow to live in.

Having watched the show, children took part in a workshop to give them the opportunity to test some of the dance moves they had watched and create their own versions of the show in small groups. In the workshop, we also gave time and space for conversations with the children about what they had learned and how bees can be supported to survive and thrive. During the workshop discussions, children were encouraged to consider what they might be able to do personally, such as planting or not harming wildflowers, helping weary bees find flower patches, or creating insect baths on hot days.

The project was a delicate balance of inspiring through storytelling, while ensuring the actions we discussed felt relevant to children and provide them with the sense that they can personally have a role in creating a better world.

By sharing the Plan Bee project, I hope to showcase it as an example of how we might seek to tell stories which go beyond knowledge sharing and which offer a transformative experience that speaks to children's sense of empathy and gives them an understanding of how they can engage with positive change.

To make a song and dance about environmental crises such as bee decline is not to diminish the pain that these circumstances bring, but to try to make

it real in a way that meaningfully prepares children without overburdening them emotionally.

If, as the social and neuroscience research tells us, we help them take those first independent steps towards positive action, they are far more likely to grow up as a generation feeling able to cope and engage with the changes needed to face ongoing environmental crises. In this instance, we hope (perhaps literally) to sow the seeds of care for children to feel inspired to advocate for and take actions to help protect bees.

A short film about the making of Plan Bee:
vimeo.com/680914286

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