



Sightlines Initiative

Doing The Right Thing

Working with Children in a Natural Environment, Early Childhood Educators Reevaluate their Theory and Practice



Doing The Right Thing

This film is part of research at Walkergate Early Years Centre with Sightlines Initiative, into the creative responses of children within natural outdoor environments and the effects this has on the thinking of children and staff.

Reflective practice is intrinsic to daily life in the nursery, but we hoped that this project would help us to develop a better understanding of a creative approach to an early years curriculum. We wanted to review, challenge and where necessary modify our systems for supporting effective learning and teaching.

Walkergate Early Years Centre is situated in the east end of Newcastle upon Tyne. It is a Children's Centre encompassing a local authority nursery school with one hundred and four pupils and an attached family centre providing a variety of family support services. The research was planned with a group of children from the nursery school who worked in an open plan classroom with a team of teachers and nursery nurses. Seven weekly sessions were arranged at the Rising Sun country park with an additional seven follow up sessions in the nursery, all in partnership with an artist as a creative partner. The project enabled us all to explore, observe and reflect in an environment with only natural resources and without the constraints of a timetable and planned expectations. Collated information was studied at weekly meetings, helping us to identify emerging interests and to tune in to individual learning styles. This informed our planning and enabled us to examine our pedagogy.

Children flourished in this environment where staff were not leading the learning but were co-constructors in the process. They were able to adapt and transform their own play with greatly inspired imaginations, and as the weeks progressed they became more confident in their explorations, often revisiting or developing previous ideas and interests. Staff were able to join in as playful practitioners, acknowledging and supporting children's ideas and encouraging them to think and solve problems for themselves. The shared experiences enhanced the quality of relationships which had a dramatic effect on the focus, sense of purpose and motivation, particularly for a

“Creativity seems to find its power when adults are less tied to prescriptive teaching but instead become observers and interpreters of problematic situations”

Loris Malaguzzi
'The Hundred Languages of Children'

group of boys who had previously presented with challenging behaviour in our 'everyday context'. We have come to realise that deep emotional support is crucial. Children seem to know and respond when they are aware that we are genuine in our acknowledgements of their interests and achievements, along with any difficulties they may encounter.

We believe that this project has helped us to gain a clearer idea of what constitutes a quality education. The open-ended environment of the country park met all our criteria for providing an approach that develops children's autonomy and self confidence through nourishing experiences.

Our challenge now is how to systematically develop that approach within our setting. Despite the development of our strong beliefs and convictions regarding a creative learning approach, reconciling the needs of a government administrative culture that appears to require prescriptive planning and narrow assessment can often be problematic. We found that our observations and documentation gave us a fuller picture of a child's holistic development, rather than the snapshots which give us only moments in time and are often unrelated. These provide a powerful basis for the government's evidence audits whilst aiding our curriculum enrichment. We realise that were we to design our curriculum solely based on 'the targets' we would be impoverishing rather than enriching the possibilities of what we offer the children, and so we need to remain bold and imaginative, and ready to demonstrate the evidence of achievements for which government's assessors will look.

We hope that the filmed extracts of our project will give a clearer picture of our enquiry into creative learning to others working in the field of education who share our values or for those who wish to embark upon their own creative journey.

"Through a curriculum rich in creative and imaginative opportunities, young children have the opportunity to develop skills, attitudes and knowledge that will benefit all areas of their learning"

Bernadette Duffy,
Supporting
Creativity and
Imagination in the
Early Years, 1998

Introduction

As early years educators, we all want to 'do the right thing'. We recognise the need for a creative and reflective approach to teaching children. But what does this mean in practice? And what are the impediments – in society, in institutions, and above all in ourselves – that inhibit the development of truly creative systems in early years education?

We're asking ourselves – what does 'teaching' mean? Some cultures, current and historical, don't recognize any need for reflection, because, for them, education, and its environment means teaching – passing on, instructing in, packages of knowledge and skills. In the UK, our ideas about 'what education is' are still informed by a mishmash of conflicting ideas, about children, and about education (?needy, asocial, infantile ... about achieving goals, 'preparing' for ..the next stage, training).

For us, education is about learning, enquiry and curiosity, and supporting the human disposition to enquire and make sense of the world. Our premise is that the learning environment needs to be a studio, or lab space for exploration, and is inhabited by inherently keen, intelligent learners, working with active minds, bodies and multiple intelligences, with all the tools of all their senses. Our opportunity and task, as educators, is to imagine, create, advocate and inhabit this environment.

This video addresses these questions. It follows the progress of a pre-school project conducted at Walkergate Early Years Centre and at the Rising Sun Countryside Centre in North Tyneside. Educators and a 'creative enabler' came together through the Spring Term to work each week with groups of pre-school children. Each group spent half a day each week at the Rising Sun Countryside Centre, and the work there was continued and developed in the nursery. Time for the adults to reflect on each week's events was built in to the project.

The video focuses on how the adults involved in the project – teachers, educators and 'creative enablers' – used a reflective and collaborative approach in working with the children to

"Imaginative activity ... is a mode of thought which is essentially generative: in which we attempt to expand the possibilities of a given situation; to look at it afresh or anew from a new perspective.... Creative insights often occur when existing ideas are combined or reinterpreted in unexpected ways ... Creativity carries with it the idea of action and purpose. It is, in a sense, applied imagination."

All Our Futures:
Creativity, Culture
& Education, DfEE
1999

investigate what is meant by ‘creative practice’, and to explore ways in which an ‘environment of enquiry’ might be developed and maintained. In particular, we were interested in how teachers and creative enablers could work together to inform each other’s understanding of the place of creativity in early years’ education.

Many challenges were involved. The aim was to support the children in exploring and enquiring, to harness their natural curiosity, their creativity and imagination, to foster their learning about the world and about themselves.

For the adults, this often meant questioning our established ways of working with children, considering how best to stimulate, develop and respond to the children’s learning, and overcoming many acquired pre-conceptions and modes of interaction.

It soon became apparent that collaborative relationships – with the children and with colleagues – are the key to developing effective and professional collaboration and systems that encourage creativity.

What kinds of help can we choose to give to a child who’s feeling stuck and upset? Here, Nicola and Jude arrive and lend confidence and encouragement – they know that he can ‘do it’ – and he continues on his clamber up the hill.

This video is not a ‘how-to’ video. It is not about techniques or skills. Rather, it shows some of the challenges we encountered, our responses to them, and suggests an approach to re-examining our habitual thinking about early years education. It addresses the basic question – how can we best understand and support children in their learning?

Initial discussion at our weekly meetings centred on the events and narratives that had developed at that week’s Rising Sun session and in the nursery. By definition, creativity involves change, and it was difficult to begin with to focus on our own thought processes – our assumptions, motivations and expectations – and how these influenced our inter-actions with the children, and unconsciously steered events.

“I don’t know what I may seem to the world. But to myself I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the seashore and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.”

Isaac Newton, 1727

Gradually though, we were able to focus more on what we had found difficult or challenging, what had or hadn't worked in terms of real engagement. We began to identify how, in practice, learning takes place.

The opportunity to reflect enabled us to see and understand the themes that lay behind the stories. Many themes became apparent.

In their first observations and reflections together, the educative team looked for the competencies, responses, fascinations of the children, using their regular review times to also heighten their own capacities as individuals and as a team to exchange different points of views, observations and understandings – to get to the heart of the children's ideas, feelings, interactions.

“The practitioner must create a climate where curiosity is encouraged and where children can experience the unexpected. ... Children need to feel safe enough to take risks, make mistakes and be adventurous in their creative pursuits. Giving them help in tolerating uncertainty and discarding ideas that are not useful will support this.

If children are to have the confidence to try innovative ideas, they must be given time to work at their own pace. In this way, children are able to communicate ideas and feelings, make connections, innovate and solve problems. It begins with curiosity and involves children in exploration and experimentation. As they express their creativity, they draw upon their imagination and originality. They make decisions, take risks and play with ideas.

Children's creativity develops over time and takes time. It is best facilitated by adults who sensitively support this process and do not dominate it...children need the freedom to develop their own ideas and the support of adults who can help them gain the skills that enable their creativity to have expression.”

Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage, DFEE 2001

“Creativity should not be considered a separate mental faculty but a characteristic of our way of thinking, knowing, and making choices”

Loris Malaguzzi,
The Hundred
Languages of
Children, 1998

1) Side by Side

The Rising Sun was just a new place to the children. Unlike the nursery, which has a pre-defined purpose and given constraints and expectations, no initial barriers to the children's exploration were set up other than the physical boundaries of the site. They were essentially free to use the space and its features in any way they wished. This had many liberating effects on the children and on their relationships with each other and with the adults. As teachers, we all like to think we 'value and respect' children, but the Rising Sun provided a setting that enabled the adults to engage with the children in new ways, to reflect on the nature of that engagement, and to work at making it more real, meaningful and positive.

Of course, as educators we continued to contain and structure the children's experiences, to be watchful and to construct narratives from our observations, but our active involvement in the children's activities changed the context of those activities, and something new was created from this companionable way of working.

Often, a form of engagement could be achieved simply by picking up the children's ideas and running with them – sometimes literally!

2) Learning to Listen

The characteristic of empathy and listening was easier to achieve in this unstructured environment. We recognised the continuing challenge to simplify the pre school environment to enable stillness, uninterrupted time, and companionship as a strong pedagogical feature.

Rebecca was clearly fascinated by the dead bird. But what was the nature of that fascination? Our first response as adults may have been to project our thoughts and feelings about death and mortality onto the child, to protect her from sadness or grief, or to worry about issues of hygiene and health. But by our restraining these impulses and offering instead quiet companionship and understanding, Rebecca was able to work through her feelings at her own speed and in her own way. We sometimes forget that observation and cognition – and just being together with children – are in themselves tools we can

Adults need to think about their various possible play roles with children, and to utilize these with care and intent. Usually the most effective interventions were the most 'aware' – ie when the adults had made conscious choices about how to interact. Being able to remain aware of yourself whilst you're engaged with children, rather like being a puppetmaster pulling your own strings, or being the fly on the ceiling, is probably a prerequisite for a professional educator.

Empathy & companionship; quietness, stillness, pace; stillness, simplicity, uninterruptedness; focus and concentration – we discovered that these were important factors in allowing us to become involved in the children's exploration, rather than imposing our own agenda.

develop and use in our teaching. We learned to use observation as a form of companionship, rather than merely a means of assessment. Observing and documenting our observations are key to developing pathways to learning.

3) Questioning Boundaries

This sometimes meant questioning the validity of our habitual responses to the children's activity. Over the weeks the children had been building and fixing. Harry requested a ladder. Boundaries – physical and social – were explored and re-defined. We had to consider how far the usual rules constrained the children's learning and development, and how far they could be relaxed without endangering the children. Would allowing the children more freedom to find their own boundaries in the context of the natural world have positive effects on their learning and their personal development?

We had to learn to analyse what was really going on in our inter-actions with the children – to recognise when our agenda differed from theirs, or there was a mismatch between our respective goals and priorities.

4) In Need of Rescue?

When the children felt they needed help, they asked for it, and quickly learned that an adult would always come to their aid. This soon became a favourite game, and they would repeatedly look for situations in which they would need 'rescuing'. To begin with, the adults saw their role in these situations as being responsible, reassuring, capable, helpful. Gradually, however, through the process of cyclical review and detailed reflection built into the project, it became clear that the children were enjoying the sensation of being able to control the adult's behaviour – the need to be rescued gave them a temporary power over the adults.

Rebecca gave the team quite a little challenge with how to handle her find of the dead baby bird. Modelling from one another, and from the shared principle that we should be helping her explore her ideas and feelings, helped keep unhelpful, out-of-tune adult responses at bay, and promoted a more supportive situation – but did she really want to 'put it somewhere' at all?

- *when is rescue necessary?*
- *rescue as a game*
- *adult perceptions of rescue*

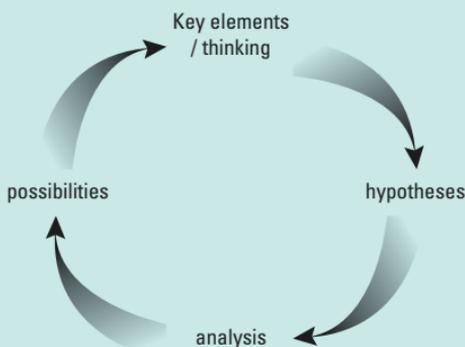
The practice of cyclical review...

Provocations & challenges

Create interventions which playfully expand and add dimension to the focus of interest

Organisational tools

- Ring binder collection: allows for flexible evidence building
- Devise style sheets to allow for group analysis
- Backpack notebooks
- Creative and appropriate IT use reflects multi-intelligence of learning



Observational foci

- Open
- Group
- Categorical
- Individuals

Open-eyed observation

- Looking for the points of fascination, struggle and exchange
- Meet, discuss, exchange
- A listening analysis: what's under the surface?

As staff continued to review their practice, we recognised children's elemental needs and joy in wallowing in mud. We actively encouraged it back in the nursery.

5) Natural Stuff

The Rising Sun allowed the children the opportunity to experience natural materials in new and intimate ways. The power of these elemental materials to fascinate the children soon became evident in the meanings they found, and the expressive language they used to describe them. The children explored clay soil and compost again inside and outside in the natural and vibrant ways of exploration and exchange that they had moved with in the woods.

We're looking to a much richer use of open-ended natural materials in the early childhood environment – it provides a richer stimulus for deeply engaged, much more imaginative and creative work by children. (In order to make space, we invite you to remove much of the available commercial material, which is often crude in its approach to learning, understanding of children, and in its paucity of possibilities.)

– elements,
materials and
meaning

A discussion of this can be found in the single article extract from ReFocus Journal 4: Elemental Experiences. ReFocus Journal is available from www.sightlines-initiative.com

6) A Sociable Place...

As educators, we become accustomed to seeing children's social responses as being less developed and sophisticated than our own. We forget, perhaps, that children's responses to each other can be just as complex, even though they may not have a fully-developed range of verbal and non-verbal tools to communicate them. despite their not yet fully developed range of verbal and non-verbal tools to communicate them.

We became aware of a need to continually re-assess our interpretations of what was happening in the children's social world – our first impressions often reflected our own concerns and responses. We learned not to make assumptions nor leap to immediate conclusions, but to take the time to see situations from the children's perspective. It's not enough just to hear children – we have to really listen to them. Observation, documentation and reflective interpretation are necessary parts of this process.

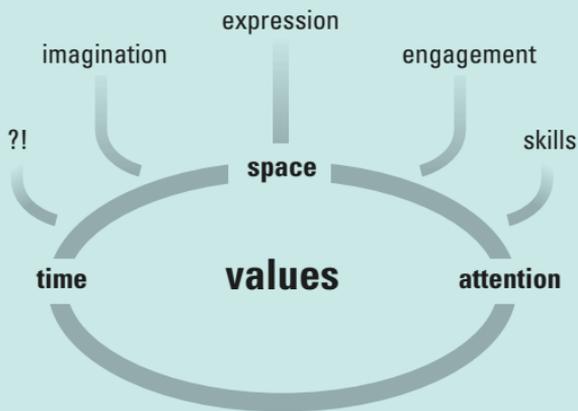
Unexpected energetic action, like throwing, often disturbs us adults – especially if we don't feel 'in control' – we can think and respond as if we are talking to 'wild things' – but look at the boys' interactions – they have their own rules and awareness. What are I responses? What do you think the various boys are exploring? All individuals, and some in particular, learned from watching others, but then found great opportunities for new exchanges.

- *confidence*
- *encouraging collaboration*
- *conflict*

7) A Place for Stories

Storymaking emerged and developed, and was enriched by support in both environments. Our aim was to work towards the development of a creative curriculum with competent and achieving children. It was clear that the nature of our relationships with the children was a key factor, and that having the time and space to share their experiences as equals allowed a shared creativity to develop. Time, space and real attention were required for these to be developed in effective ways. Working with a creative enabler colleague brought many new insights and skills to the project, and contributed greatly to the essential reflective process.

- *sticks*
- *transformability, fluidity*
- *shadowplay*
- *encouraging narrative development*
- *language – adults and children*



Time, Space and Attention...

The key tools educators have at hand to 'play with' in their development of responsive and attentive systems – Environments of Enquiry...

'Valuing children' is not something that happens automatically – it has to be worked at. As educators, we have to continually re-assess – and sometimes discard – our inbuilt habits of thought in order to develop truly creative attitudes and systems.

David brings along his toy and introduces it as 'Appleby's foal'. But it takes us adults some false starts and incorrect associations (because we hadn't slowed down enough to listen well enough) to understand that Appleby is a real horse in David's home life, and so the toy has a particularly rich emotional meaning for David. 'The witch' is a subject of another group's imaginative play, and you can see in the 'Appleby and the Witch hunt' observation, how the children later incorporate their interests. How many tangles do we make everyday through not listening well enough?!

If we are to engage in shared meanings and understanding with children, we need to listen and think with all our senses.

"Our experience ... confirms that children need a great deal of freedom: the freedom to investigate and to try, to make mistakes and to correct mistakes, to choose where and with whom to invest their curiosity, intelligence and emotions. Children need the freedom to appreciate the infinite resources of their hands, their eyes and their ears, the resources of forms, materials, sounds and colours. They need the freedom to realise how reason, thought, and imagination can create continuous interweavings of things, and can move and shake the world.

Children must have the freedom to do all this without anyone arbitrarily setting the timing, rhythms, and measures for them. Yet this valuable apprenticeship, which cannot be left to chance, can only be accomplished when children are assured of the broad and active co-participation of adults."

Loris Malaguzzi, 1992. Introduction to the exhibition: The Hundred Languages of Children

Credits

Staff, Children and Parents of Walkergate Early Years Centre,
2006-7

Sightlines Initiative

Nicola Balfour, Creative enabler

Kirsty Brown, Rising Sun Countryside Centre

Videoworks

CARA/CAPEuk – Funding support 2007

Los Grecos & Catherine Reding – Music

Paul Matson & James Ward – Graphic design/DVD production

*This particular
project took place
during 2006-7.*

*It is part of a
Sightlines Initiative
development of
collaborative work
since 1998, alongside
other educators and
creative enablers.*

Produced by Sightlines Initiative 2008



DVD Resources

The following PDF files can be accessed by loading the DVD onto a PC and opening the folder called 'Resources'.

- Introduction and video script
- Educator's observational notes
- Playing & Learning Outdoors Training: Sightlines Initiative professional developments
- Elemental Materials: ReFocus Journal article
- About Sightlines & ReFocus



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