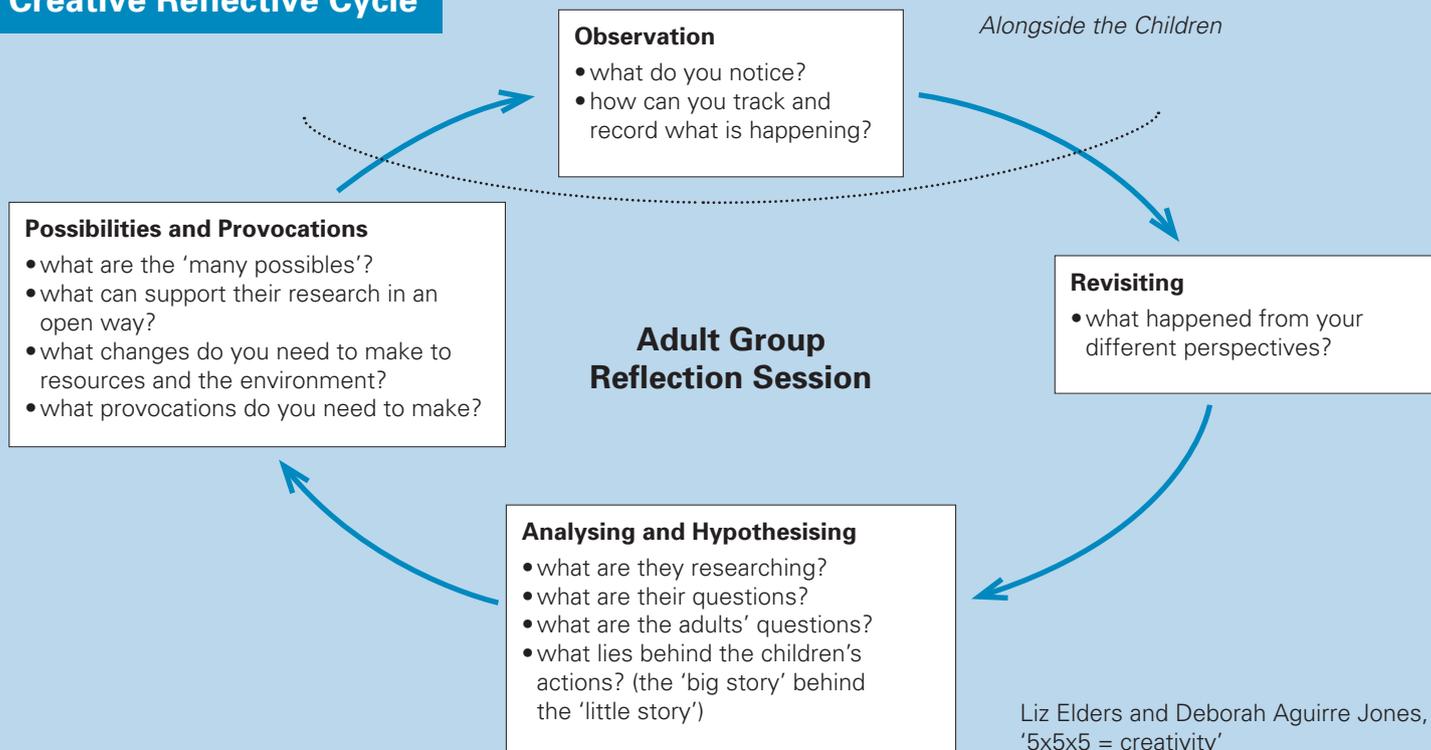


Reflecting on the Reflective Cycle

Developing a thinking structure to support a creative and reflective approach to teaching and learning

Creative Reflective Cycle



The origins of the idea

The creative reflective cycle diagram can be traced back to Sightlines Initiative's Creative Foundation Project in their innovatory work inspired by Reggio Emilia.

The next stage in its use was its impact on 5x5x5=creativity (see various articles about this project in ReFocus Journal, issues 1, 2 and 6). Robin Duckett and Elaine Mason used this thinking structure when they led initial professional development sessions back in 2002. Since that time, colleagues in 5x5x5 have experimented with the underpinning ideas (see Bancroft et al, 2008). In particular Liz Elders and Deborah Aguirre Jones have found the creative and reflective cycle invaluable in enabling settings and artists new to the principles of Reggio to embark on this approach to negotiated learning. From their experiences with different forms of provision they have revised the original version.

Underpinning ideas

Some of the key theoretical ideas of the cycle are:

- The recognition of children's competences and capacities, starting from observations. One of the most important books from Reggio Children and Harvard, *Making Learning Visible*, gives examples of the potential of children from toddlers onwards (Giudici et al, 2001).
- Co-construction of ideas with children and adults together researching and making meaning. This may be called 'negotiated learning' (see Forman and Fyfe in Edwards et al, 1998). In this approach

children's words are treated as discourse – they are the subject of extensive study.

- The 'pedagogy of listening' (Rinaldi, 2006) describes the natural development of the first two points.
- Researchful practice creates conditions for listening. According to Kline (1998): 'Attention, the act of listening with respect and fascination, is the key to a thinking environment. When you are listening to someone, much of the quality of what you are hearing is your effect on them. Your attention, your listening is that important.'
- Adult reflection is described by Schön (1983) as having two important stages: in action and on action. When engaged with children, the educator is open and flexible, able to reflect actually in, that is during, practice. He compares this to the jazz musician who is constantly responding to the others in the band. After the work with the children a further form of reflection takes place. This time the focus is on the experiences.

Readers who are familiar with the principles of Reggio Emilia will readily recognise these. The Forman and Fyfe chapter is strongly recommended. They discuss the differences between documentation and display and the role of documentation as a research report rather than a record of action. Documentation in this sense values children's talk as discourse and therefore treats it as subject matter for investigation.

The process of the adults' creative and reflective cycle

The creative reflective cycle could be thought of, like breath, as a vital exchange of energy that goes on between the children and the adults. As in breathing, it is a continuous cycle made up of a progression of stages. The in-breath is observation, our reading of the environment and what is happening. The pause between in and out breath is the revisiting, analysing and generating of possibilities. The out-breath is our response to the children and the environment of enquiry, our breathing life back into it. This is a continuous cycle that involves a reciprocal exchange between the children and the adults.

During the sessions with the children:

Observation

The process of observation requires an open state of mind. The observer has a quietness in the moments of observation but still has a presence and is actively listening (Rinaldi, 2006). There are different modes or phases of observing. Initially there may be a while spent scanning – using all of the senses to take everything in, noticing across a wide horizon looking for something that attracts our attention. Curiosity needs to be awake and alert for it to be caught and for us to become authentically interested. When a child's action, gesture, exchange or dialogue catches our attention we dive, going deep and focussing in. At this point we may pick up our notebook or camera and start tracking and recording the details. A sixth sense can kick in when we start to record the richness. At this stage, we are recording what is happening rather than analysing it.

The next three phases of the cycle take place in a reflection session by the group of adults who are directly concerned with supporting the children's opportunities to explore. Dedicated time and space are needed to develop a reflective pedagogy.

Revisiting

The first part of this dialogue revisits what happened. People have different curiosities. The things they focus in on will be different or they will have viewed events from a different perspective. Observations that have occurred at different times may well be relevant to building up a 3-D, illuminative picture from the different fragments. For instance, one person might have picked up a child's fascination for turning or spinning objects and another person had noticed that they were making circular marks on paper. These complementary observations will help in building a picture of a repeated pattern of behaviour.

Analysing and hypothesising

We then have a rich, textured story that we have co-constructed and can analyse. At this stage, we start to make sense of what and how the children are exploring. Using a process of asking questions, interpreting, discussing and debating we conjecture about what is going on. This is a process of going back and forth, seeking to understand the children's understandings, thinking and questions. What is their cognitive map? We are generating ideas about what they are doing, forming hypotheses that can be tested through further observation and rejecting or revising before arriving at a proposed theory to be worked with.

For example, when a group of children demonstrated a persistent interest in superhero play, what was it that they were really exploring? What was the 'big idea' that lay beneath the surface? (Robin Duckett) What we saw on the surface was the superhero play. Our hypotheses were that the deeper underlying layers involved an exploration of power and control, good versus evil, life and death.

Possibilities and provocations

In order to proceed with the next cycle we need to ask, 'What is a good way to support the children's (and our) lines of enquiry – to support their questions, their big idea?' The adults can engage in a process of generating ideas and creating a wide palette – changes to the environment, materials, provocations etc. We then focus in on one or two responses that appear to hold the most potential for supporting the children in this stage of their enquiry. These responses can be offered and negotiated with the children.

The rest of the palette, plus new suggestions generated through discussion with the children, remain as possibilities that allow for responses in the moment or in future cycles. Equally the inquiry may go in unexpected directions with many ideas becoming irrelevant. (Guidici et al., 2001) The next cycle of inquiry with the children, however, may well reveal the need to take 'the big idea' deeper in an unanticipated way. A good example of this is described by Forman and Fyfe (in Edwards et al., 1998, p. 244) where children began with drawing sunflowers in full bloom. However the adults recognised that the children could go beyond the simply descriptive. They asked the children to draw pictures showing how the seeds were produced. 'The teacher had engaged the children's minds about their theories. This is a process of *planning for possibilities* that needs to remain responsive, not adult-led planning of a list of activities to be worked through.'

Journeying on...

The cycle is never-ending. This article has concentrated on the adults' reflections but the children too will be drawn into this reflective mode. It is valuable for them to experience revisiting, hypothesising and projecting forward. In a more intuitive way, the children continue their play, which may flow in directions unexpected to the educators whilst deepening the quality of shared research, fascination and enquiry. The adults remain alert and able to capitalise on the opportunities that arrive.

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Further information

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Schön D. (1987) *Educating the Reflective Practitioner: Toward a new design for teaching and learning in the professions* Jossey Bass