



SIGHTLINES INITIATIVE : Creative Foundation Project

Year II Evaluation

Introduction

Basic details about the context, including organisation, goals, etc. (from SI team)

The Creative Foundation project, at the end of its second year, has been evaluated in order to consider its progress and goals for the third year. The artist, educator and manager in each early years setting were interviewed using a semi-structured format. The questions were the same for the artists and educators, but with slight variations for the manager. The issues we have looked at are the impact on the children and the environment, the consequences of the collaboration between the artist and the educator, how documentation is being developed, professional development and goals/challenges for the future.

1. The impact on the children

Everyone responded with positive enthusiasm to this question about the project, though about half of the replies focussed more on the effect of the artist on the overall environment of the setting - the second area to be discussed in this report.

There were many different perceptions of the benefits. The principles of the project felt right: 'It is a whole new way of looking at things for the children.' 'This way of working is a much more natural way, giving children positive outcomes (Cath, educator).'

Enrichment

The project provided a 'wealth of experience' (Jan, manager), children had access to resources and expertise which they would not previously have had and developed their use of materials. They learned new skills and 'had opportunities to use everyday equipment and materials in an unusual and different way, e.g. Turning things on their head, ...different mediums, OHP – shadow puppets, looking at form and shape' (Emma, artist). The diversity of provocations is considered in more detail below.

Following children's interests

The adults had mostly taken the lead from the children '... finding out their own interests and things that excite, which have been developed and taken further' (Dorothy, manager). 'When I am in, the project is theirs... (Emma, artist).' In only one nursery the manager felt that the artist was pursuing his own ideas, rather than those of the children. However, perhaps it takes time to realise that one can trust the children. Jan, another manager, observed that 'as the staff become more confident, they are able to let children grow and explore things.' By focussing on children's ideas the adults were helped to understand them more deeply.

In one case the project fitted naturally into their normal work style 'we have always worked in a non-directive way – going with their interests/point of view (Lynne, manager)'.

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Empowerment

The sense of enthusiastic engagement by the children is evident in all the responses. Clearly they were empowered by the freedom when ample time is available. The project 'puts the children more in control of their own learning (Dorothy, manager)'. There were many examples of children creating their own stories, developing their own ideas.

Individuals were strengthened

Reflections on the impact on the children took various forms but the recognition of individual differences was significant as Malcolm (artist) noted, 'it helps unlock what the child is anyway.' 'A capable child can also become a catalyst for other children in the group ... other children need more support.'

Some less confident children blossomed. In a 'significant breakthrough' a girl was having problems forming relationships with staff and the children, but, 'through the introduction of the Elf theme (following a visit to a show 'The Elves and the Shoemaker') she became enthralled and engaged, it was as if someone had turned the light on.' (Dorothy, manager) In this group two boys were causing concern because of their destructive behaviour. As a result of their observations the staff developed a better understanding of one of the boys interests, in this case, 'gorillas'. The artist and educator enabled the development of this theme 'allowing the physical to come first ...encouraging the boys with physical play and drawing out other ideas with them, making things (Nicola, artist)'.

Progress

Some children have made a great deal of progress and development which they would not have done if it had not been for the project, 'e.g. Daniel who was very withdrawn, developed his own story around the Mouse House. Also another child with autistic tendencies, his speech has developed (Christine, educator)'.

Calm and co-operative

During the second year as the whole environment changed 'the children's behaviour is much calmer (Lynne, manager). 'The project has helped combat competitiveness among a group of boys, who have become much more co-operative (Christine, educator)'. 'The project enables the children to work alongside each other, work more together not competitively (Annette, artist)'.

Interpersonal skills

A noticeable difference was observed in children's social and interpersonal skills (Nicola, artist). Role play using hardhats and exploring the activities of the builders on the nursery site 'particularly helped a group of three quite disruptive boys, [previously] very physical and aggressive towards each other and others. We tackled this head-on by finding strategies to help them work together with a focus, more cooperatively. They constructed a variety of structures, dens, outdoors and indoors (Malcolm, artist).' 'Children may form friendships that are not always expected in other situations (Annette, artist)'.

Self-esteem

'The project gives children the chance to shine at something, to develop their own confidence, boosting their self-esteem through initiating their own ideas (Christine, educator)'.

Confidence

As a result of the project the 'children are very confident about investigating anything to do with art/science/exploration.' Also those who have previously experienced the project have asked to continue their interest into an after school club (Wendy, manager).

Imagination and language skills

There are many examples of imaginative story-telling which have involved language skills as children communicate with each other. (See below in **Themes and Modes of Expression**)

2. The environment

In Reggio Emilia the environment is referred to as 'the third teacher'. It has the potential to support children's exploration and thinking and influence the formation of groups. The environment can be considered at least to include the actual physical spaces and furniture layout, materials and equipment and their availability, the use of light, colour and texture as well as the allocation of time and ethos. (Important texts from Reggio Children are ***Children, Spaces and Relations*** (1998) and ***Atelier*** (2000))

Perhaps it is the fact that this is a second year evaluation but there was evidence of significant changes in over half of the settings. At Helen Gibson Nursery School the environment has been 'transformed' (Cath, educator). This was a 'major part of the project' (Lynne, manager). The artist Keith, who has both design expertise and practical woodworking skills had led the way. He noted that following a visit to Reggio he had 'understanding of the wider context, observing how staff relate to events and the way in which things fit together to create a conducive learning environment (artist).' As an outsider he could step back and see the bigger picture. Staff saw the changes they were making as an investment. 'The walls have all been painted white to reflect natural light, curtains taken down to let in more light and wooden blinds have replaced them. Having Perspex shelving for children to see their work even from underneath looking up, using the shelves in the nursery much more for display rather than storage. Original furniture has been adapted to be a better size for the children (Lynne, manager)'. Another room is used for free play. But this is not the end of the changes – further plans are afoot to develop the interior space by opening up the kitchen area and the toilet area. The staff are beginning to develop the outside space too.

At Walkergate Nursery the artist noticed that the staff were more confident about using the limited space in different ways, as the educator phrased it 'we have become much more flexible/adaptable in using the space we have, moving particular activities to more suitable rooms (Maggie)'. They have been able to use a room specifically for art and construction,

for long-term projects. This enables the children and staff to have more freedom (Dorothy, manager). Here too they considered the use of displays. They 'kept the materials/displays on the walls for a lot longer than normal due to the children's interest in them. [These were] a lot more interactive for the children to engage in (Maggie, educator).'

Two settings had building work in progress. At Cruddas Park, major building works are taking place but the Creative Foundation project is influencing the layout and design. The works stimulated children, leading to den making both inside and out. The staff were able to allow the structures and dens to remain allowing play to continue. At Redesdale the works made it a difficult time, though the freshly dug topsoil gave the children rich opportunities for exploring, while the introduction of withies led to constructions. (See also the section below.) Inside they created 'an area especially for dance/OHP-shadows using curtains and drapes to separate the area (Christine, educator).'

Some settings found the limitations of their space very challenging, especially when there was nowhere to leave things out permanently.

The outside was important and frequently mentioned, for example at Hadrian School 'we were able to transform the outside area with sand and water, using huge sheets of plastic that changed form and shape while using hosepipes (Annette, artist).'

3. Themes and modes of expression

Responses to these questions indicate the adults' delight as well as that of the children. Often it is immediate events which spark off the theme. At Redesdale 'builders' was a strong theme with a group of boys. The digging in the mud led to collecting of pottery pieces found in the soil. An old hub-cap was found and became a spaceship for the Elf – another imaginative story which was so real to the children that one boy 'asked Jyl to hold on to his legs as he looked in to one of the holes just in case the Elf pulled him in (Christine, educator).'

Minibeasts and worms were found (also discovered at the Rising Sun Country Park with which this nursery has had a long-established connection), which they observed and drew. They even saw 'a mouse come out as they sat and drew in silence (Christine, educator).'

Trees were not only climbed but given different names, 'a girl who saw a small broken tree next to a bigger tree named the bigger tree a 'sad tree' because the 'baby tree' was broken'. Maps were made – creating their own names for places, where things happen. Sticks were used in various ways, not in competitive mode, but helping each other up the hill by arranging sticks to hold on to. Sticks also became tools and were used to make sounds. Mud was used to make potions which led on to stories about mud-dragons and crocodiles.

Meanwhile at Walkergate the result of a visit to a production of the Elves and the Shoemaker was a remarkable development of 'role play, pretend play and spontaneous play'. One boy spotted a trapdoor in the nursery and linked it to the one on the stage in the original production – this was the real start. 'Creative work followed naturally with letters to the elves that lived under the nursery. They used ideas such as leaving footprints, leaving

biscuits for the elves to eat overnight, sprinkling glitter dust etc, to encourage belief (Maggie, educator).’ Clothes and puppets were made, construction was encouraged (a garden for the elves made with rocks and flowers). Nicola (the artist) offered the children a rich range of modes of expression using for example, clay, plaster, mosaic, acetates and silk paint.

Found resources were brought back from trips such as the seaside objects which prompted the making of a magic cave at Jesmond Nursery. Interestingly den-making occurred in several settings.

The skill of the artists and educators is the ability to follow the childrens’ fascinations and provide them with the raw materials. It is not about taking in a ‘bag of tricks’ (Emma, artist).

4. Artist/educator collaborations

There was evidence of mutually rewarding collaboration in over half of the settings. This had improved over the second year as people's relationships strengthened. Artists became more confident and they knew about the practicalities particular to the setting. 'You can be patient and quietly persistent in a long-term project, it allows people time to change (Nicola, artist).'

Good collaboration depended on all the adults being prepared to take the time to talk after each session with the children. In this reflection period they could discuss freely and openly. Effective partnerships were supportive of each other, open to new ideas, 'we both felt we could experiment, take risks, without feeling a failure if it didn't work (Nicola, artist).'

They were prepared to work as a team and appreciate each other's ideas and expertise. 'We never feel under pressure or panic if things go wrong or change (Dorothy, manager).'

Staff felt enabled by the artists.

The relationships were of course individual and the balance, or division, of labour varied. Karen (educator) felt that the artist was able to keep an overall outlook on the needs of the whole nursery. Keith as an artist was also aware of a broader role which was not just concerned with the days when he was in the nursery 'I have tried to enable the staff to take the lead, withdrawing myself from being the one who comes up with the ideas, deliberately ...tried to stay low key. I asked staff what they had done since my last visit, to aid them in looking back on what has happened and to gain insight into future ideas from the children'.

Great respect for the competence of the educators was expressed by two of the artists, 'the staff are very astute and aware of ways of working, we all come together with our ideas about the children and what we have individually observed in and from different ways (Malcolm, artist).'

When there is a high turnover of staff it is obviously very difficult to build relationships and for the newcomers to gain sufficient confidence for real engagement. In one nursery it was problematic and inexperienced members of staff found it difficult to be involved. Instead they took on a custodial role with the children who were not with the artist. Here the ethos of the project does not seem to have been fully shared. The artist brought in ideas, materials and talents which the staff used under his direction. However he appeared more concerned with his own ideas, rather than those of the children.

5. Documentation

All the respondents had been working on developing their documentation skills and all but one reported progress. They described themselves as being more organised, more focussed and having better systems than before.

Karen (educator) at Cruddas Park co-ordinated the team of three - 'one person is the scribe, another takes the photos and the other works with the children (Malcolm, artist).'

The scribe observed and recorded the dialogue of the children when possible. At the end of each session the digital images were downloaded and used for reflection and discussion. The documentation was then transferred to the pc where Sharon worked out a colour-

coded system 'to highlight specific children and their ideas and the outcomes of the session.' Selected photos were included. They described this as a map recording the children's journey. It has formed 'a real archive of the project's work (Karen, educator)'. During this second year we have been 'adjusting, changing and modifying it so [the system] works! (Karen)'

Over half of the settings used digital cameras each session. Everyone had notebooks or observation sheets, some used tape recorders and one a video camera. However the most important matter was how they used the gathered documentation.

At Walkergate the material was formed into two books – one for the children and the other for the nursery. In other settings there were displays which drew in the parents. The artist kept a project diary too. Maggie (educator) welcomed the fact that they had extra supply cover releasing her for observation, which developed over the second year.

Helen Gibson Nursery School's approach depended on notebooks and clipboards with the documentation transferred to 'a chart which highlights/tracks the observations/slides of

individual children.' The chart also had a column highlighting possible future development and the skills and experiences that could be present (Keith, artist)'. They valued the opportunity to discuss the observations in depth.

'Catching children's conversations' is not easy but most of the groups found it became easier through practice. They were all looking for new ways of working and evaluating them. Over the second year 'we believe more in what we are doing, more confident, more freedom (Dorothy, manager)'.

One of the key issues, which most of the groups had resolved, was who should do the documentation. The best solution seemed to be sharing it and working as a team (Cath, educator). The other important issue was to ring-fence time for reflection immediately after the session.

Who is documentation for? Several created Powerpoint presentations for the children using the images to promote discussion on what had happened and what might develop in the future. Parents were mentioned as being drawn in to the project through the documentation. It was also important 'to make it easy for all the staff to see where the main themes are (Nicola, artist)'.

6. Professional Development

The participants were asked about the impact of the project on their own professional development in terms of new understandings/insights about children and new or different approaches. All the respondents except one gave examples of very positive professional development.

Knowledge and understanding of children

Most implied a change in their perception of children. Maggie (educator) 'I find I am stopping in my normal practice, taking a step back. A major change now is I have

confidence to allow children the freedom to follow their own ideas. Believing in the fact that children have their own ideas to create'. 'It opened my eyes (Cath, educator)'. Lynne and Cath both particularly noted their belief in the importance of allowing the children time and space.

The way that children collaborated in groups struck three of the respondents. Annette referred to them collaborating and supporting each other. Nicola (artist) 'valued the partnerships which occur between children in small groups.' Malcolm (artist) had observed children acting as catalysts to others. Both Dorothy and Christine felt that they understood 'how the project has helped combativeness among a group of boys, who became more co-operative (Christine, educator).'

The project 'reaffirmed what I believe in which is sometimes lost in all the restrictions put on us ... it was the way in which I was trained – good to get back the focus for the children (Dorothy, manager).'

Documentation skills

Several reflected with satisfaction on the technical skills they had acquired, using digital cameras and other IT technology. Malcolm (artist) noted that his documentation skills had improved and Lynne (manager) referred to her observation skills. (See also the previous section on documentation.)

Ways of thinking

Many referred to their increased confidence which was underpinned by thoughtful practice and deep reflection. They talked about allowing thinking time.

Jyl (artist) felt she was thinking in different ways and was more aware of 'emotional literacy'. They valued the philosophy of the Creative Foundation project which strengthened their understanding of the process. Lynne described the enormous impact it had on her understanding and insight into what the children were doing. It made her question things.

Only one educator (*Heather*) thought she had not progressed, regretting that she had not spoken out more.

While professional development was mainly taking place as a consequence of regular reflective practice within the nursery among the collaborating team, there were two other important 'interventions'. Four of the group attended a Study Tour in Reggio Emilia during the second year of the project. For them all it was powerful 'a huge effect', 'life-changing', 'strengthening personal beliefs', 'totally positive' and it 'rubbed off on to the others in the nursery (Christine, educator).'

The evening learning group

While for more than half of the respondents this was much appreciated there were criticisms. The biggest problem was the timing of the sessions – too late in the day (when people were too tired), at an awkward time; the food helped one member, for another though food was a waste of time.

The level and content of the sessions did not please everyone. There were mixed messages about the sessions – some said they were boring but others said it was very interesting, two found it fascinating, lovely and enriching. Sometimes there was too much chatting according to Jyl (artist) and Keith wanted a deeper, more challenging level. It needed a tighter structure, more defined and focussed according to another. Lynne (manager) was impressed by other people's contributions and found it useful to share problems.

These contradictory statements can probably be understood as an indication of the very different levels of experience and understanding within the group.

Looking ahead to Year Three

The goals and aspirations for the final year of the Creative foundation project covered an interesting range, from very practical changes, such as a new building (Didier, artist) and a static video camera (Malcolm, artist) to a wish for more philosophical debate based on Creative Foundation principles (Jan, manager).

The most common goal was to bring the whole nursery and the project together. Colleagues phrased this in different ways: to integrate it throughout the 'community of the nursery' (Keith, artist) or as Liz (manager) and Heather (educator) put it, they wanted to empower staff to 'have a go'. Malcolm (artist) spoke of the development of staff throughout the nursery and making the project embedded and sustainable. The educator there (Karen) wanted to get everyone on board.

Several had ideas for the professional development of the staff of the nursery, for example, SightLines Initiative team to come and give a talk (Nicola, artist) or to have professional development like the evening learning group (Jan, manager). Three people wanted to visit other similar projects.

Improving the aesthetic of the nursery, creating new environments and developing the outdoors area were noted. More skill development in the use of new technologies was the wish of Cath (educator).

Malcolm was looking at how to engage the parents more.

Apart from visiting other projects Annette (artist) aimed to read more about creative play, play therapy, how the mind works and learning theories.

Going much further afield, Didier hoped policy makers would listen to the importance of the Creative Foundation projects.

Continuing challenges and issues

The opportunity of the final question prompted a variety of responses.

Finding and organising time was perhaps the most important. The project demands a big commitment though as Maggie said 'it is very enjoyable.' Time was needed both for documentation and reflection and when extra staff cover was available it was very helpful.

Documentation remains a challenge, but everyone recognised its importance though Jyl (artist) said this 'understanding didn't kick in for a long time but now I see its relevance.'

The importance of all the staff 'valuing and understanding the potential of working in this way' was a priority for Keith. Staff development to enable them to think broadly and 'not in boxes' about creative reflective practice was his goal. Jan (manager) also felt it was a very positive for everyone, especially valuing the impact of the philosophy on the whole centre.

The issue of appropriate intervention by an artist (or an educator) in the children's activities was an ongoing challenge. The presentation of the 'Theatre Curtain' project from Reggio Emilia at a Learning Group had sparked off some major questions among some artists (Jyl, Malcolm and Nicola). For Malcolm this also involved examining flexibility, structure and balance.

Three respondents wanted more funding – in one case for equipment and in another for 'work time' in order to recompense the time spent on preparing PowerPoint presentations and attending the learning group. At Walkergate Dorothy (manager) was looking for extra funding to employ the artist more often as a permanent member of the team.

One artist suggested regular meetings for the artists (Jyl).

Improving communication between SightLines Initiative and the work in the nursery was an issue for a couple of nurseries. A newsletter was suggested as means of keeping a better flow of information (Christine, educator).

But finally the concluding thoughts of Lynne (manager) *'It has been very beneficial to be involved as educators, for the children and also the parents. The environment of the nursery has improved, feels a much more positive place to be for everyone, the children's behaviour is much calmer, nicer to work for the staff. In terms of the parents – one parent was given an insight into her own ideas of play at home, her son had an enormous interest*

in the 'boxes theme'. After playing with boxes – painting, getting inside them, collecting things in them he took them home. The parent was amazed at how such a simple object can give children so much to explore. It had an impact on the whole home, valuable play at home with his other siblings.'