

WHAT IS 5x5x5?

5x5x5=Creativity in the Early Years is a major research project across Bath, North East Somerset and Bristol, that involves two groups of five early years settings, five artists and five cultural centres working in partnership to support young children's creativity. Innovative creative projects emerge through this process, with artists, educators and cultural centres working together to support young children in their exploration and expression of creative ideas.

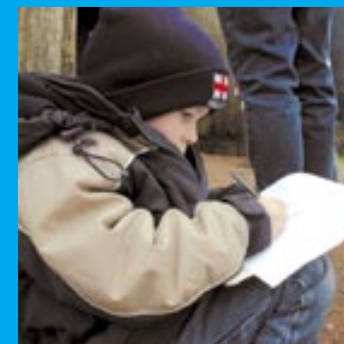
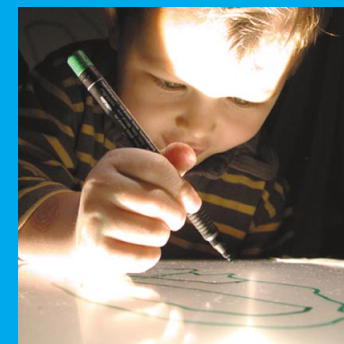
The children in the project responded with enormous energy and irrepressible enthusiasm to the new kinds of freedom they were offered; the educators, artists and parents responded in kind, recognising the children's creative powers and taking their ideas and inventions seriously, as the children were quick to realise. One artist recalls a child imperiously calling to her across the room: "Write this down, Cath, it's important!" – unexpected and significant words for an adult to hear from a child.

5x5x5 has been inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach, and the experiences of earlier projects, based at the Sightlines Initiative, which is also the UK Reggio Children link. These projects, Young Children's Creative Thinking in Action (1999-2001), and Creative Foundation (a three year community project in seven settings), were significant precursors to 5x5x5.

5x5x5 is funded by NESTA, Arts Council South West and other local bodies. Two evaluation reports, covering the first two years of the project, 2002-3 and 2003-4, have been published, and are available from Penny Hay, Arts Development Officer, 16a Broad Street, Bath BA1 5LJ (£5 inc. p&p, cheques payable to Bath & N.East Somerset Council).

THE REPORT: 5x5x5 IN CONTEXT

CHALLENGES AND CHANGES



EXTRAORDINARY TIMES

Tony Blair, speaking to the NAHT in April 2004:

'The importance of quality early years provision is now incontrovertible ... we will accomplish, for the first time in Britain, a nationwide universal early years service for under fives based on the personal needs of each child and their parents.'

Gordon Brown, speaking to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in July 2004:

'It is clear ... that the earliest years – once the lowest priority – are now becoming amongst the highest priorities: not just the biggest gap in provision and the next frontier to cross, but one of the single most important investments that the welfare state can make.'

Gillian Pugh, Chief Executive of Coram Family (created a Dame of the British Empire in the 2005 Honours List) calls this new understanding 'a sea change' and goes on to say that it constitutes 'an extraordinarily ambitious national agenda for all children. The vision of the Green Paper **Every Child Matters** and the Children Bill going through Parliament could transform the way in which services are delivered and the priority we place upon children's well-being in its widest sense.' (in a lecture given at the CfBT Reform Club dinner September 2004)

These are extraordinary times in the field of early years care and education. After years of neglect, benign and not-so-benign, early years services are leading the way in developing truly child-centred services.

There is now high level political commitment right across government to children and families, with a specific emphasis on very young children.

Changes in policy, funding and the structures of local services are matched by a steady growth in the evidence-base that informs the work on the ground: the large-scale, longitudinal EPPE study (2004) (the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education Project) has much to say about the importance of parents as children's first educators, and the educational environment of the home, as well as about the characteristics of those settings that have the most beneficial effects on children's educational attainment and behaviour.

Smaller scale, observational studies have a great deal to tell us about the day-by-day processes of early learning: a recent book from Professor Angela Anning and Kathy Ring, for example, is eloquent about the creative powers that children express in their drawings, just as much as in their play, talk and movement. Across the Atlantic, the indefatigable Vivian Gussin Paley, visionary, researcher and kindergarten teacher, continues to inspire her readers with first-hand accounts of children learning, in their fantasy and dramatic play, to be members of a harmonious community, as they and their educators collaborate in building a society that strengthens their growing intellectual, social and emotional powers of understanding and expressing.

EXTRAORDINARY TIMES

WHAT IS THE REGGIO EMILIA APPROACH?

In the prosperous northern region of Italy, Emilia Romagna, children from birth to three, and from three to six, attend infant-toddler centres and pre-schools that have become internationally renowned as exemplars of good practice.

The grass-roots movement for progressive and inclusive early education in the region began in the very first months after the end of the second world war – indeed the first school to be built, from the rubble of the bombed-out houses of the village of Villa Cella, is now known as the April 25 School, the date of the Allied Liberation in 1945.

The vision of the parents who built that school lives on in the 33 centres for young children that now flourish in Reggio, Bologna, Modena and other towns and cities of the region, which is characterised by a long history of socialist municipal government, and a firm belief in collective responsibility for children.

Loris Malaguzzi (1920-1994), the great pedagogical thinker and the first head of the municipal early childhood centres, says of those first parents: 'They asked for nothing less than that this school, which they had built with their own hands, be a different kind of school ... that could educate their children in a different way from before ... children first of all had to be taken seriously and believed in.'

Another major influence upon the best of British early years practice is the work of educators in the north of Italy, in the region of Emilia Romagna.

This radical, grass-roots movement, now widely known as the Reggio approach, (after the principal city of the region, Reggio Emilia) is becoming more and more well-known to British educators, managers, academics and other professionals in the field, not least through the travelling exhibit **The Hundred Languages of Children**, which visited the UK for the third time in 2004.

This magnificent exhibit was accompanied in each of its five venues by a programme of conferences, seminars and practical workshops for children, families, artists and educators.

In Cambridge, for example, the local network of early years practitioners who hosted the exhibit organised a programme of more than 15 events, attended by over 500 people, while over 2000 people visited the exhibit.

The evaluation report, commissioned by the local Cambridge group, **Learning from Reggio**, documents the enthusiasm of the participants for learning more about Reggio; more importantly, it emphasises their growing understanding that the Reggio approach is more than a set of material resources, or pedagogical tools; rather it is a distinctive way of thinking about children, about their place in society, and about the relationship between teaching and learning (Maddock 2005).

EXTRAORDINARY TIMES

SOME KEY CONCEPTS IN THE REGGIO APPROACH

- a particular construction of children and childhood: Reggio educators see young children as rich, strong and powerful, rather than as immature, ignorant and incompetent.
- the pedagogy of relationships: Reggio educators emphasise the connectedness of children and their place in society. Carlina Rinaldi, until recently Director of Services to Children in the region, says 'When a child is born, a citizen is born'.
- a commitment to working with the 'hundred languages of children', the expressive languages of the visual arts, dance and music, as well as spoken and written language, with which children communicate their growing understanding of the world.
- the child's right to creative freedom, which Malaguzzi defines as 'a space of trust, solidarity and joy'.

On the broader educational scene, while the current improvement agenda and the drive to push up standards continue to dominate many aspects of teachers' professional lives, there is also a growing awareness of deeper, more intellectually demanding issues.

There is debate, for example, about the place of autonomous learners in performance-oriented schools and classrooms; there is a shift from the practice of assessment of learning (as in measurement, scores, targets and goals) to the growing practice of assessment for learning, in which young people are invited to assume greater responsibility and control over their educational progress and well-being.

There is a move towards a more collegiate model for organising learning: these shifts in practice and perception may indicate a more responsive and optimistic approach to what Professor Clyde Chitty calls 'the essential concept of human educability' (2001:115).

It is against this background that this report considers the work of the NESTA funded project 5x5x5=Creativity in the Early Years.

A CREATIVE RESEARCH PROJECT



The 5x5x5 research project, now in its third successful year, is of particular interest as a project partly inspired by the Reggio experience, but far more than a British translation of an Italian approach. The 'triangular' structure of 5x5x5, the linking of artist, early years setting and cultural centre, has given birth to strong reflective partnerships, whose members work collaboratively to develop their individual projects with the children in each setting. In 5x5x5 this structure serves purposes of enormous significance to the whole early years community: living and working in a culture of research, its members are engaged in a process designed to deepen thinking and stimulate change.

This is a startling and bold alternative to the culture of obedience and compliance, the most unwelcome, and unintended, outcome of the last decade of top-down initiatives and the torrent of guidance documents, guidelines and tool-kits that have all but submerged the early years profession. To be encouraged to think for yourself, in the company of other thinkers, to ask difficult and searching questions about your practice and provision, to learn to think more critically and reflectively, as the educators in 5x5x5 have been doing, could be the beginning of a radically different culture in the early years, in which the current obsession with targets, goals and pre-specified learning outcomes would swiftly wither away.

The two reports from 5x5x5 remind us that there are 'other ways of being in the world', to use a challenging phrase coined by Robin Duckett, Director of the Sightlines Initiative, which has been closely involved with the project and is also the UK reference point for Reggio Children. These new ways of being, immersed in a continuous process of dialogue and debate, re-framing and re-application, are not, of course, without their costs. Inevitably, there are tensions and conflicts to contend with, and the 5x5x5 (2003-4) report identifies some of the most salient of these, including the clash between traditional views of learning,

A CREATIVE RESEARCH PROJECT



and the kinds of learning generated by the open-ended projects in the 5x5x5 settings, which have many parallels with the kinds of learning documented in the **Hundred Languages** exhibition.

The reports bubble with enthusiasm for what the children brought to their involvement; 'the children were the stars!' says the report on the second year of work. The findings from the first year focussed on 'the explosion of learning capacities' in the children's experience of 5x5x5. It is worth remembering though, as the Reggio educators never cease to emphasise, that those capacities were there all along – and always are. The problem is that in a less than totally supportive environment, it is all too easy for those capacities to be diminished, constrained, confined. No danger of that in the 5x5x5 settings, where both artists and educators have become ever more keenly aware of the things that children can do when the time and the space are right. This is a theme echoed in the evaluation report from the Cambridge network; for example, one participant in the programme of events is quoted as saying 'I didn't realise children were capable of such deeply philosophical thought.'

The children in the 5x5x5 settings are effortlessly creative, experts and polymaths, mastery learners in many dimensions. Their powers are scrupulously documented by their educators, and the artists and mentors who observe them so attentively and respectfully. They observe the children's powers to do (explore, exchange, transform, represent, discover, play, communicate), their powers to think (imagine, invent, discuss, reflect), and their significant learning dispositions (perseverance, curiosity, concentration, engagement). Above all, the documentation captures the children's capacity for story-telling; the children's stories pour out of them, no matter what the initial stimulus. The second report quotes from the latest work of Vivian Gussin Paley,

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the inspirational writer, researcher and kindergarten teacher, who argues that fantasy and dramatic play, the playing out of children's stories about the world, is the best and most 'nourishing habitat for the growth of cognitive, narrative and social connectivity' (A Child's Work 2004 p8).

The 5x5x5 projects invited children to live and learn in just such nourishing habitats, and the results were awesome. Mary Fawcett, Advisor to 5x5x5, tells of a sceptical Year 2 teacher, recruited to help with the documentation in a project reception class, who was stunned by the stories told by the four and five year old children she was observing.

The 5x5x5 project has had significant outcomes for adults too, not least the flowering of new and sometimes challenging relationships between participants with different professional expertise, different perspectives and different priorities. Penny Hay, the Project Manager, sees the relationships as the heart of the project; she talks of the 70 adults involved as a community, deeply engaged in creative learning, a community of researchers, committed to reflection, exchange and dialogue, relishing the 'playful possibilities' and the idiosyncratic approaches that flourish within the fluid developing structure of the project. The Reggio principle of the pedagogy of relationships is relevant here; we can see how much these adults were learning about their own capacities for growth and change through their initiation into new kinds of professional encounters. The traditional classroom model, four walls, a teacher and a door, suddenly seems woefully inadequate.

Robin Duckett, at Sightlines, echoes Penny Hay's emphasis: 'the big lesson of 5x5x5 is community', he says, describing a community welded together by the spirit of enquiry, learning to do reflection and documentation, learning to ask good questions and enjoy it, dogged advocates for creative excellence.

EVERYTHING IS A BEGINNING



For all the wonderful achievements that the 5x5x5 reports describe, their authors are well aware that, even in their third year of work, they are in a sense at the beginning, rather than drawing to a close. Nine settings from the first two years are still actively engaged in the research cycle, pursuing themes that have arisen in the course of the project; staff in three of these school settings are claiming that 5x5x5 is making an impact on the school as a whole, in that its values and principles are permeating every age group, from the Foundation Stage to Year 6.

Work with parents is developing too; parents are attending staff development sessions, and collaborating in the continuous process of documentation, fascinated by what they are seeing of children's learning. Their level of involvement is remarkable: Mary Fawcett comments 'I've never seen anything like this before – in 50 years!'

Other developments are running alongside this on-going practical activity: shifts in thinking, language and perception, an emphasis on creative values replacing the idea of creative learning. And, it is safe to predict, these kinds of changes will continue – not just in the 5x5x5 settings, but in the growing number of smaller but similar networks across the country, many of whom are linked into the national ReFocus network, co-ordinated by the Sightlines Initiative, and all of whom are realising that every step of their developmental journey teaches them how much more there is to learn.

One concern that many, many educators share is how their emerging ways of working can be made to fit with the official structures of the Foundation Stage, the QCA guidance document (QCA 2000), and its early learning goals. At one level, it is clear, there is congruence between the principles set out in the

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guidance, with its emphasis on involving parents and responding to children's developing insights, and the principles of 5x5x5. Indeed, Chris Holmes, development officer at Sightlines, goes so far as to say 'the guidance could have been written for our project.' But, at a deeper level, there are tensions to be faced and resolved.

My own research in reception classes, as part of a small-scale study of what's going on 'Inside the Foundation Stage' (Adams et al 2004), revealed a profound misreading of the purpose and promise of this re-structuring of early education. We saw educators treating the guidance as if it were more than guidance, as if it were the curriculum itself, to be treated with reverence, and compliance.

The text in the guidance that sets out the underpinning principles was seen as of small importance compared to the long passages of text about appropriate activities to provide, which were treated as an official prescription, to be followed to the letter, and saying all there is to say about pedagogy. The 'Stepping Stones' and Early Learning Goals appeared to constitute the official last word on what four and five year olds should learn.

This misreading will do damage to children's learning, and to their educators: it is time to move on. The metaphors of 'goals' and 'stepping stones' are simply not good enough to express our growing understanding of the richness and complexity of children's learning.

The lists of appropriate activities (labelled '**What the practitioner needs to do**') are entirely inappropriate for educators who are working towards an emergent curriculum, one that responds to children's passionate interest in the world, and to their energy in representing and expressing their ideas, stories,

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hypotheses and inventions. While educators are required to report on children's learning in the official vocabulary of the early learning goals, these terms, and others like them (targets, learning objectives), should not be used to think with. We must replace them, when we are doing our most important task as educators, (which is to think, deeply, critically, reflectively), with words drawn from the lexicon of process, with words that do justice to children's extraordinary powers – to do, to think, to feel, to understand, to represent and express.

Furthermore, we must articulate more clearly our growing understanding that an appropriate early years curriculum is one that gives children and their educators space and time to encounter the whole beautiful, mysterious, difficult world; the words in the official guidance are an insufficient representation of this world, even when they are enriched by some of the minor trappings of the Reggio approach, the ubiquitous light-tables and mirrors, for example, or the weekly presence of a visiting artist.

This practice is, incidentally, a telling contrast with provision in Reggio itself, with an *atelier* and *atelierista* in every setting: an artist's workshop ('a place of provocation' in Malaguzzi's words) and a full-time professional, expert in both early childhood and the creative arts. The changes that need making are more radical ones than most of what we have seen so far, and, as some of the 5x5x5 project members are beginning to realise, may involve loss, as well as gain. Less, in the long term, may mean more. Less planning, less material provision, less clarity about outcomes, less structure imposed by adults – these kinds of changes would make space for more of children's energies to be deployed: in developing their own plans and projects, imposing their own intellectual order on their own enquiries, living their learning in worlds of their own making.

EVERYTHING IS A BEGINNING



On the last page of the 5x5x5 (2003-4) report, the authors list some key issues for the future. One of them stands out for me as the key to all the others: issues of ‘power and democracy.’

A striking difference between the settings in Emilia Romagna and our own, even our most successful and innovative centres, is the level of political understanding that informs the local communities served by the Reggio municipality. Parents and educators in the region are members of a society with a firm belief in collective responsibility for children, who are not seen as private property, but as fully-fledged citizens.

Parents understand that they have a vital part to play in shaping services that are good enough for their children, who are equally the whole society’s children; there is a shared consciousness that the education of these young children is far too important to be left to the teachers, the pedagogistas and the atelieristas, talented and committed as they are.

Ann Jamieson, Director of the national early years project **Big Wide Talk**, which is researching and developing radical new models of participation for families and practitioners, puts it like this: “In this country, pedagogy is the teacher’s domain; it exists in a bubble, inside the school building. In Reggio, the pedagogy is of the place, owned by the local community, part of the way things get done.” Indeed, the Reggio movement is deeply democratic in ways that we are only just beginning to think about in our own provisions. The extent to which projects like 5x5x5 can work as democratic communities, offering new perspectives on the distribution of power, modelling new structures of control, management and solidarity, is a vital factor in the future of services for young children and their families in this country. Meanwhile, at least, a beginning has been made.

CONCLUSION



Optimists, of whom there are plenty in the early years community, love beginnings; in the first few weeks of any new endeavour, the future always looks bright. The secret of retaining that optimism is to be realistic about the scale of the beginning that has been made. However excited the participants in innovative and creative projects may be, there is little to be gained from an unrealistic sense of completion, when the really hard work still lies ahead. While much has been achieved by 5x5x5, and other related projects, there is still more to do. The re-shaping of the whole of our early childhood services into a reflective, creative, critical community of co-researchers is still a long way off. What is most encouraging about all the beginnings that have been made, in the South West, the Midlands, in the North East and in East Anglia, for example, is that they are local initiatives, led by people in their own local communities, doing the things that need doing for themselves. External funding is enormously stimulating and empowering, and artists, coordinators, mentors and educators all need salaries. But the imaginative energy for local developments is supplied by individuals, committed to local themes and causes; key members of the new communities, who will transform our services. They will, like the 5x5x5 participants, embrace the projects of reflection, enquiry and debate, they will commit themselves to the discipline of uncertainty and open-mindedness – and, in time, great things will be done.

Finally, we must remember that for all its emphasis on the concept of community, and the creative excellence of the people who form those communities, the 5x5x5 experience is not just about adults: children are at its core. As Mary Fawcett points out, the community has both purpose and direction: ‘the children are the focus and the fascination.’ And there are children in every community, ready and waiting for our best endeavours on their behalf.

Mary Jane Drummond – writer and researcher

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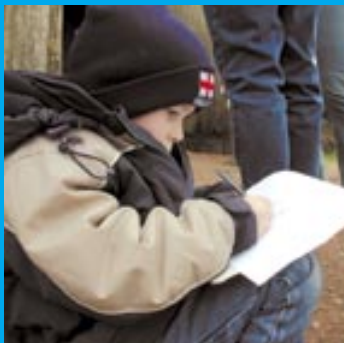
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NESTA

Fishmongers' Chambers, 110 Upper Thames Street
London EC4R 3TW

Tel: 020 7645 9500 Fax: 020 7645 9501

www.nesta.org.uk

