

# *Young Children's Creative Thinking In Action*

*Project Evaluation  
1998-2002*



I'm a mermaid bird: Lauren



**Evaluation of the SightLines Initiative  
'Young Children's Creative Thinking In  
Action' Projects  
1998-2002**

**Anna Duffy & Elaine Mason**

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## Introduction and background to the projects

The Young Children's Creative Thinking In Action (YCCTIA) project was set up in 1998 with funding from the Arts Lottery, Arts for Everyone programme. The initiative, which was run over three academic years, created a community of projects in which artists and educators combined their skills and expertise to engage with young children's explorations of their worlds.

The purpose of the YCCTIA project was to '*create significant opportunities for and experience of, creative approaches to communication, exploration and expression*' in a variety of early years settings, (i.e. children up to six). It aimed to be an innovative project that would be a lasting and general reference point in the development of creative education. The proposal was informed by two pilot projects carried out during the summer of 1997 in Newcastle in conjunction with the showing of the exhibition, '*One Hundred Languages of Children*' from the internationally renowned pre-schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy. The inspiration for the projects came from the approach taken in these pre-schools in Northern Italy where the educational provision in the early years reflects the desire to develop and promote opportunities and environments for young children that derive from profound theories about children and their learning. These theories encompass a view of children as strong, rich and competent learners with the right to an environment and experiences that reflect these beliefs. Visitors to the Italian schools are not only impressed by the organisation and quality of the services that give respect to the potential of children but also fascinated by one of the cornerstones of the approach that is to employ an artist, (atelierista) as a full staff member to work with the children on projects, (progettazione) in order to develop powers of hypothesis, communication, exploration, perception and invention; in essence, to support and develop creative thinking. The way in which the artist works is very different to the traditional way in which artists are employed in schools in the UK in which a final product is an important and significant outcome. Instead, the artists, working in collaboration with practitioners, allow children to have holistic and deeply meaningful experiences based on their individual interests and learning dispositions, unfettered by the imposition of a subject bound curriculum or other adult structures and assumptions.

It was this way of working then, which interested and inspired a number of practitioners around Tyneside. Some of these practitioners had had the opportunity to visit the pre-schools in Italy on study tours organised by Sightlines, others had read about the schools or visited the exhibition, '*One Hundred Languages of Children*' in Newcastle during 1997.

Following successful applications for funding, a local steering group, made up of five members of the local UK/Reggio development group, was formed to work with the project co-ordinator of SightLines, Robin Duckett. The group oversaw the setting up, organising and facilitation of projects in which school-centred

creative work with children would be backed by evaluation, reflective processes and training.

SightLines invited interested early years settings in the public, private and voluntary sectors, to apply for membership of the YCCTIA projects. The invitation gave practitioners the opportunity to work alongside artists in their settings in a way that supported communication between children and saw representation or creation as a tool for deeper comprehension. The projects would use the pedagogy of the Reggio pre-schools as a strong reference with training and development playing a crucial part in this. The initial invitation was for the academic year 1998-9 with the option to apply for membership in years two and three following discussion and evaluation. The project allowed for ten settings in year one, fifteen in year two and twenty in year three. There was a very good response from settings that were keen to try working in a way that respected children's ideas and thinking processes and through which they could explore this type of collaboration with an artist. The response came from settings across Tyneside and Durham and selection was made on the basis of the '*level of enthusiasm of the whole establishment, readiness for growth and change, a respectful approach to children, geographical balance and a spirit of adventure.*'

Artists were selected who had a proven commitment to developing creative thinking and to working collaboratively. A record of working with young children was desirable as well as some knowledge of the Reggio approach.

## The Projects: Organisation

The projects were organised to allow artists to work half-day sessions in settings for a period of twenty weeks. They provided funding for an additional member of staff to be employed for each of the 20 half day sessions in order that those directly involved had more freedom to document activities through written observations of children, photographs, use of audio and video tape etc. The artist would support activities by offering skills and resources that would be based on these detailed observations and the close attention to children's thinking processes. The proposal for the initiative stated that *'The focus of this project will be to use – and develop – creative methodology in helping children explore and communicate their own ideas and understandings.'*

The arrangement was that the artists' sessions be spread out over twenty weeks to allow time for reflection and development between sessions. Most settings adopted this timetable but were free to make their own arrangements with their artist.

The purpose of the project seen from the perspective of a practitioner in one of the settings involved was as follows:

*'The thinking behind it is that if you leave children to discover the pathway into their imagination they will. And so it's almost releasing them rather than controlling them . . . you can trust children to be learners and have their own destiny for their learning. '*

An artist's view was expressed as:

*'This way of working with young children is very close to an effective working model of anything creative and expressive.... The early years are much closer to the action of creativity because it may not be producing an object – the process is much closer to a truthful way of working creatively. The process is seeing where the growth points are.'*

The project was intended as a significant training and practice development exercise so work was backed by a series of seminars for professional development for all the adults involved in the projects. These were to complement and support work in progress, building on skills and knowledge and help provide a pedagogical framework. Tina Cook from the University of Northumbria's research team was instrumental in organising and running the seminars and other training tools included the use of participant's diaries, observations, discussions, video tape and photographic documentation. Opportunities for reflection and a sharing of experiences and thinking, allowing for the possibility of building a UK model of practice, were taken full advantage of. In addition to maximising children's potential as creative thinkers, another aim of the project was to *'develop a coherent and articulate body of expertise*

*in the region amongst the arts community that could feed the national arena and educational development'*

To facilitate the approach, SightLines created a resource bank of equipment that could be borrowed by settings that included digital cameras and audio recorders. The artists held a small sum of money for purchasing equipment and resources additional to those provided by settings.



## **The Evaluative Process**

In all there were thirty-one settings that participated in the project over the three years; ten in year one, fifteen in year two and twenty in year three. This evaluation has focused on the settings that were part of the project for each of its three years and has explored their experience in depth rather than try to evaluate every project or make an arbitrary selection from the larger group. The research team, Elaine Mason and Anna Duffy investigated the process of the development of practice and examined the insights gained by the participants in the project. The research was undertaken towards the end of the academic year of the third year of the project so that it was still possible to see some work in progress but also to gain the insights and developments from year three.

There were eight settings within Durham, Newcastle, North and South Tyneside LEAs that had participated in all three years of the project. Within these the children ranged from one to five years old and the list below describes the range of provision within this group of eight.

- 3 LEA Nursery Schools
- 1 Private Nursery
- 2 Reception Classes
- 1 Nursery Class in a Special School
- 1 Social Services Day Nursery

The methodology of this evaluation was to interview the staff of the settings and the artist who worked alongside them. In some instances it was possible to see the work in progress, in others to look at documentation or changes made to settings as a result of the projects but the bulk of data gathered came from interviews with practitioners, artists and managers in the settings.

There were seven artists who were currently working in the eight settings. Their joint skills and experience included ceramics, sculpture, dance, drama, music and fine art. Five of these artists had worked with the Sightlines projects throughout the three years. In the year the evaluation was taking place the artists work with the children included:

Sensory experiences - water, clay, wood, light, sound

Spatial experiences – constructions, dens

Specifically expressive/ interpretive experiences – movement, paint and drawing

Among the topics discussed in the interviews with the staff and artists in the settings were:

- new insights they had gained
- reflections on the children's responses
- feelings about the experience of working with a professional from a different background
- arrangements they had made for the project
- the documentation they kept and the use that was made of it

All the interviews were then transcribed and the evaluation takes the form of a collection of excerpts from the interviews with some commentary. In the selections from interviews included, care has been taken to keep the identity of children, individual respondents and settings confidential. By removing these references some interesting aspects and characteristics about individual settings have been lost. However, this approach has helped to draw the focus from the passages quoted, to issues and themes emerging rather than to anecdotal experience.



## The Interviews

### General impressions

The dominant characteristic of the first three-year cohort through the SightLines Initiative was that no project was entirely like another and that individual personalities were a major factor. The degree of autonomy that the staff could exercise varied from setting to setting. Some staff were constrained by the space available. Some were able to have a dedicated space indoors; others were able to use outdoor space. In some settings projects took place in the room with everyday activities. In some cases there were external requirements to be met, either the demands of the school curriculum or from management policy. In some settings all the children were involved in the initiative, in others only a specific group. The length of contact any child had with the activities could also vary: some children could access the activities if they wished; others were given their turn on a rota. Sometimes the projects' activities were integrated and became part of the whole planning and ethos of the setting; in other places they were kept separate, a special event. The amount and type of documentation kept differed markedly, as did the use made of it. Extracts from the interviews have been used to illustrate the main findings and give a flavour of the thinking, main issues and development of all those involved in the projects and of the effects on the settings themselves.

Responses to interview questions have been grouped into 6 areas identified as being of significance to the evaluation. These areas reveal the different strands that emerged and cover the larger issues of the new learning of the practitioners and the artists, the effects of this on ideology and practice and the response of the children to the projects.

The 6 areas into which extracts from the interviews have been grouped are:

- Effects of the SightLines projects for children
- Personal growth and development of the adults involved
- Artist-educator collaboration
- Development of provision
- Documentation
- Dissemination

The range of views gathered has been fairly represented and demonstrates the commitment and enthusiasm of individuals illustrated through the careful and considered thinking revealed in the extracts. To give a sense of who is talking, each extract is followed by an abbreviation that identifies whether it is a practitioner, (Pr.), a manager, (Ma.), or an artist, (Ar.).

## 1. Effects of the YCCTIA project for the children involved.

There was unanimous agreement that the approach was successful in enabling children to explore and then communicate their own ideas and understandings. Adults felt that all the children involved in the project had been empowered, demonstrating levels of autonomy, focus and engagement as well as increased confidence and self esteem.

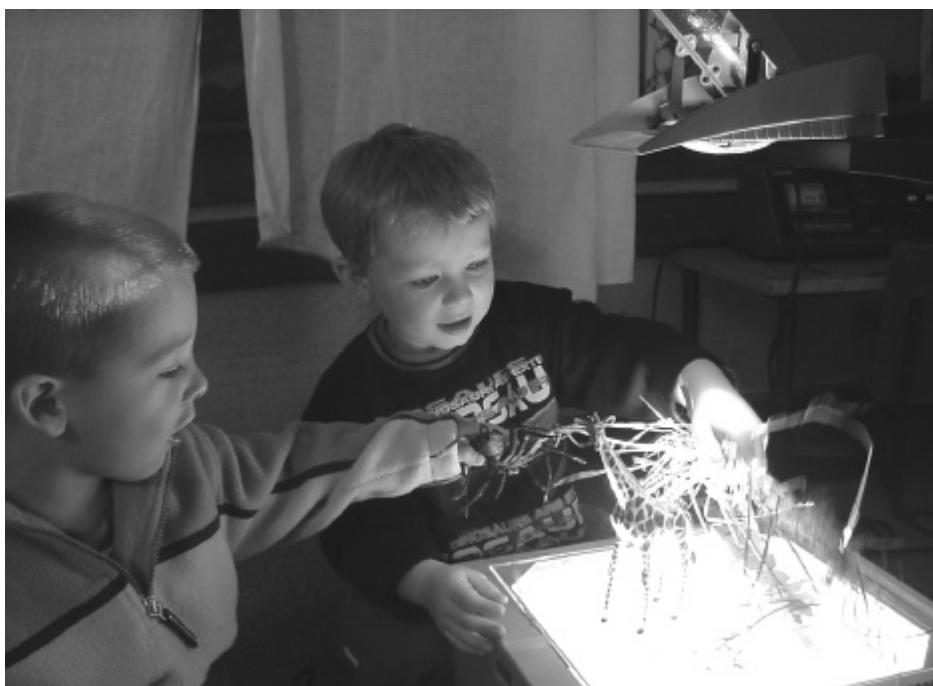
There was more independent thought from children. Learning was more about the world and how to be confident and competent and this came about from being listened to. Pr.

*The difference for the children was that we had the freedom of the time. No 'come on lets tidy up' – this affects their thinking. Pr.*

There were unexpected successes.

*There was a room that we put aside for the purpose of dance.... and there were three boys who made up their own dance to some kind of rap rhythm... and the boys were quite inspired by this rhythm and they did a rap dance with baseball hats and moving their shoulders. It was completely their dance. Pr.*

*And it was marvellous because there was a really withdrawn little girl and the first time she worked with K outside she didn't make much contribution to the project, just hammering away – she was part of a little team – but over time she came on and contributed ideas. And there was a very average little boy but he just loved using the small tools. Physically and in every way he grew in that time. And one day K brought his big tools in especially for M and it was just marvellous. Pr.*



*There was one child who was very anti-social, kicking doors and walls and that. He started to dig the big canes into the soil. Vertically. Then J came and placed one horizontally. He said, 'It's a wall.' He got cloth and put it over it and sat in his house. He learned the whole physical thing, using his strength to force the canes into the soil. He learned the skills on interaction without being aware of it. The thinking skills got stronger and stronger. They made a freestanding house in school. That is learning. The problem solving intelligence was there. What he was doing was out of routine. He was focussed, excited. In between he had thought out what he wanted to do. Hopefully some of that confidence, I'm good at this, I can, I'm strong, I can make things stand up, I can do things that other people can't do, will stay with him. Ar.*

*J became a real leader in the project – he wasn't usually able to do this because he has limited spoken language. Pr.*

*Some disruptive children found a way of being themselves without being their disruptive selves. Ar.*

*There was a lot of transference from the play with the artist to other play. The stimulus was greater because of the freedom to explore their own interests and motivations. Pr.*

*Collaboration usually happened more at group time. It was a bit like our ordinary group time but they had more control of it. The artist actively encouraged collaboration. Children that you wouldn't normally expect to join in did in a game using figures and animals. There was one more wild group of children and they really loved it. Pr.*

*The group became so confident – they were allowed to express themselves freely and learned their own boundaries. Pr.*

*The children in the nursery class for children with special needs benefited. A staff member said,*

*Just because some of our children are not physically involved doesn't mean they're not responding. A was focusing on these lights and this music for half an hour at a time and one of the significant things for A was the happy sounds she was making and she was doing a lot of vocalising and at one point she turned to me and there was this shared thing... 'Are you enjoying this too?' Pr.*

*This year there were these two little boys and they were ambulant children, with the beginnings of language and of symbolic play who worked alongside adults in whatever they were doing. In the very last session they worked together and played together in this game and they knew what it was about. M was obviously in the teacher's role and C had to do what he was told but the two boys had realised that they could play in this way, what relationships in play were like.*

*They hadn't worked together or related to each other especially in class before. It took that situation to allow them to do that. Pr.*

One practitioner summed it up.

*Children succeed and become creative when they realise they know they're going to be valued. And that applies to anything anybody does so it's OK to do what you can do and not ever say I can't or be worried about anything they do. Everyone does their own thing and be confident at doing that. I'm very proud of that. Ma.*



*Parents were very responsive and could really see the thinking and learning. They saw the wisdom in what we were doing and the special interests of their own child. Some parents really took these ideas on board and did additional stuff at home connected with the project. Pr*

*I think we can influence parent's thinking, – the competency of children becomes apparent. We didn't realise our children could think like this. Ma.*

## 2. Personal growth and development

**The comments in this section explore and illustrate the extent to which those involved in the projects developed their understanding of the approach and were able to focus their thinking, both individually and as a group in a theoretical and pedagogical sense, in ways that helped them in their practice with children.**

*As was the case with the children the adults involved in the project enjoyed and profited from the experience. Working so differently and evaluating practice so intensively was challenging for many, but staff in all the settings acknowledged the benefits to children of supporting, rather than leading and directing their thinking. Artists commented that they found the way of working more compatible with their training and personal projects where an 'open-ended' approach is highly desirable.*

*The project really built staff confidence and self-esteem. Ma.*

*We had seen the 100 Languages exhibition and we felt that the approach was the one we were trying to have with our children. We felt an affinity with what we saw. P, particularly, felt very strongly about this and so she managed to get herself with the group that was going to Reggio and when she came back she started her feedback and her general learning that had taken place. It came down to everybody. She cascaded this information to everybody and started to look at the display and her expectations of children changed and we all fell in behind P's lead. Ma.*

Practitioners had found the experience of working with the artist had made them rethink their practice.

*I changed ... I changed. I know the work the children have done is much better than the worksheet and I know that's better, it's changed my practice in that little area but I need to do more still. I do find that I try to be flexible, but in the mornings I can't be very flexible at all, but in the afternoons I really try to be. Pr.*

*I think that what we've learned to do is to slow down the pace. It's a completely different pace and a completely different attitude that we're coming to.... The other thing that we've done, we've stopped ourselves from mounting and making a big fuss about things and being more instant, trying to get things up and used. It's the learning and how it happens. The children feel valued and feel confident that they know they're going to be respected. That what they do and say is going to be listened to. And shared. That's another big aspect of what we do. Ma.*

*The change in me just happened . . through the artists and the enthusiasm . Once you start you realise how much children enjoy it – it gives you such a buzz. Pr.*

Practitioners had begun to change their approach. One instance was in the way they interacted with the children. Sometimes in the past they might have had clear expectations of where a discussion with children was likely to lead.

*I tend to put words into children's mouths. I want to supply the vocabulary, but he, [i.e. the artist] stands back and it happens. I've learned a great deal from watching him. Pr.*

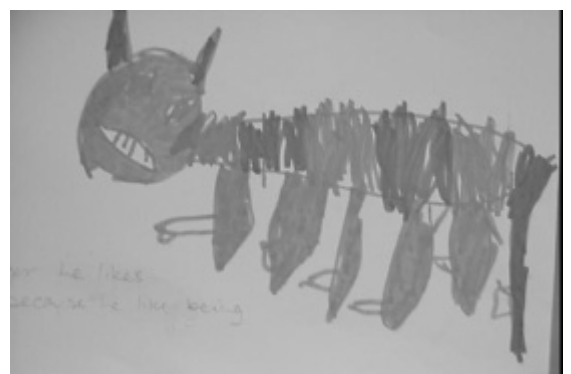
One setting had explicitly abandoned traditional teacher imposed questioning.

*'We're not having the answer to a question. We're having a discussion and they hopefully are listening to each other and that is part of the pace and part of the respect and listening to children and hearing what they say and not making judgements and dismissing and accepting, because that's the traditional thing isn't it, waiting till you have the answer you want, praising the person that gives the right answer and the rest of them feel rubbish. And if you say good, that's the end of the conversation.' Pr.*

As a result of working with the SightLines project staff intentions were re-formulated

*First of all it's getting out of that straitjacket and thinking I can do this a different way. It's a philosophical thing really. It's what education is about. Why is it important for the children to be doing this? Why is it important for the children to be learning this? What's the most important thing for these children at this stage of their lives? Is it important that they spend a lot of time in front of the computer? Is it important that we make them do so and so and make them be quiet? Or is it important that they can communicate with each other and that they can express themselves? Ma.*

*They're so individual and that's the thing about taking this flexible approach to learning, that each child can be different, that they're allowed to be different, they don't have to be the same as everyone else. And I now think that we have to take what the children are doing as our basis. Ma.*



*It made us listen more. You don't have to teach the children in order for them to learn. Of course you know this already but you don't really know how to do it until you've done it. Pr.*

*Staff became less directive giving the children more space and additional training and discussion at staff meetings encouraged this. Pr.*

*It was different from what we were doing before –people had had a themed corner but had never had a fantasy theme before. This came from the children, not from us as everything else had been. Pr.*

The co-operation with an artist had been found to be valuable because:

*It's another pair of eyes, another perspective. It's a fresh view. They don't know the children; they're not making assumptions which I think we might. We know them well... the artists don't have that and so they take the children as they are. Pr.*

*The artist's lack of an institutional approach was significant. Teachers and others working long hours with children tend to become institutionalised and this was a completely fresh approach. Pr.*

*The artist was very sensitive to the children because he hasn't been trained as a teacher and he was very enthusiastic. Pr.*

*We learned a lot from the artist because he was not an imposer; he had time for the children and was sensitive to them. Ma.*

*Our artist gave a wonderful freedom to do with the open-ended nature of everything. He is a doer and his approach was less goal oriented and outcome led, altogether more to do with risk taking and not knowing where we're going. Pr.*

An artist identified the difference in approach.

*The teacher is focused around the creation of an effective learning environment. The role of the artist is to go into that environment and work with the staff, to create a stimulating environment, through the conditions brought about by the quality of the environment, allowing the interests of the children to emerge to inform practice and give the children opportunities to reflect their interests within the environment. Ar.*

And so did a practitioner: the difference lay as much in attitude as in skills.

*Our artists are reflective people and they have a strong ethos about what they do and why they're doing it. This does come out in their work... and in how they treat each other and are with colleagues. And this is where we learn from the artist. A lot of the time they're thinking about what they do and why they're doing it. And I think they're confident. There's no right and wrong. That's easy to do through creative work. But I think there's a creative element in all of us. It's there waiting to develop and I think the Reggio work teaches you that if nothing else. Pr.*

The artists also found the experience with SightLines made new demands on them. A practitioner saw it like this:

*The skill is being able to pick up on how the children are leading you and I think educators are good at that and artists may have to learn that. Pr*

An artist agreed:

*It's a difficult thing to learn when intervention is most effective without damaging the children's creativity. Ar.*

*The thing that the artist has to do is to find the appropriate level to come in to, often especially language wise. The children that we have can have quite an impoverished bank of language and language skills. It's not to say they haven't got anything happening in their head imaginatively but expressing this can be difficult and sometimes the artist can have an expectation that the language is more advanced than it actually is and you can lose children if you pitch it wrong. Pr.*

*Working in the projects has given me room to go off on tangents. It's the opposite of how I'm normally required to work in schools –it widens opportunities and is more how I work and think as an artist. There's lots of accidental opportunities and this is more expansive. It puts the person first and the artist second. Ar.*

*I learned a lot about what staff were looking for and about interrelationships between children. Practitioners have a good, complex understanding of this – my input was more uninhibited. Ar.*





### 3. Artist-educator collaboration

The artists were seen and used very differently by each setting. This section examines the role of the artist as seen by the settings and by the artists.

*In many settings the artist was seen as a valuable resource, a strong influence on activity and on the groups with which they worked. In others they became part of a mutually supportive team.*



*The artist did a session with the staff to begin year three and we had such fun. It was active and amazing – everyone joined in and it was challenging. This was very good for us as a team-building thing. We had to work together and listen to each other's ideas. It was very exciting and worthwhile because the staff were apprehensive but it set the scene and we all knew where we were coming from. She pulled things together and used what we said in previous sessions at the start of the next session. It made staff feel so valued and the artist not so central. Ma.*

*He really engaged their imagination. He saw it all from a different angle. There was more of a wow factor. It was the weight he gave their words and ideas. He was coming at things from a different angle. I feel more confident with drama now... it's given me a freedom. Pr.*

Sometimes the artist felt left out.

*I was offering a diversion but I didn't feel as if I could play a large part in their education. I could be inspirational – this is different from what it's like for the teacher. They felt I did a bit of magic. Ar.*

Others were fully part of a team.

*The reflective chats after the sessions really helped. It was a three way mutually supportive relationship. Ar.*

*The discussions at the end of the day with the artist were very useful and this is the best training for staff, also to have someone outside the activity documenting. This was made possible through the project's system of supply cover for the sessions. Ma.*

But in others the relationship was not without its problems.

*Our artist was a big focus for the project so I felt there was more creative thinking going on. It was fantastic to be able to sit back and observe because the artist was taking the lead and taking charge of the session. Some other staff found this difficult. Pr.*

*Sometimes there was a problem keeping the project with the staff and the artist was seen as the project. Originally it wasn't happening when he wasn't there so a core group was formed and we felt that it needed five staff to work properly and to keep the thing running between the artist's visits but they ran it differently and other things came out. Staff began to be quite confident and this spread to the other groups in the nursery really enthusing people. With this enthusiasm came confidence. Ma*

*The Social Services, they have a ratio for going out of two children to one adult. For the Social Services going out was like climbing a mountain. They can't go to the beach or anything. It seems a shame. All the things we have. It's all about respect. If the staff were given more responsibility and authority... If they have a good idea they can't whip outside, spontaneity can't take place. Ar. There was the difficulty of travelling with resources and things get put away and are never seen again. It wasn't impacting on the nursery generally. There were too many staff changes for development to happen -too many variables. It was a pretty positive experience overall but the danger is that settings revert back to type when the artist leaves. Ar.*

*I feel that the projects could go further if there was sympathy from individuals all the way down. Ar.*

#### 4. Development of Provision

**This section looks at the way in which being a part of the initiative has affected the day-to-day provision made for children in settings. The extracts include comments about changes of approaches to children and also on thoughts about planning and assessment and attempts to illustrate the ways in which personal and professional developments have influenced the provision for children made by the settings over the three-year duration of the projects.**

*The effects of the projects in terms of change and development within settings was very varied and areas identified that contributed to success included continuity, training, ownership, time, resources and managerial support. A number of settings changed structures, environment, routines, and planning and assessment procedures as a direct result of being involved. Others saw it as a more long-term developmental process but all felt there had been much development over the three years.*

*We were involved in the first pilot project. It was all very new and we made a lot of mistakes. We knew it was about taking a lead from the children so we did no planning at all. We expected the artist to bring ideas with him and he expected the initiative to come from us. It was all new thinking but we learned from it and became more confident for year one. Ma.*

*I loved the pilot project and didn't want it to stop. We were learning so much at each session, it was a breath of fresh air. We had no theoretical knowledge at that point but instinctively it felt good -the proof was in the pudding, we valued it so much. Ma*

*Our Initial feelings in the first project were quite different from subsequent years. We were horrified, there were no boundaries -not really - and we were floundering. Pr.*

*The first project was planned meticulously before it started into three time slots all signed, sealed and delivered before I went into the school though there were still some open bits. In year two the practice really developed – it was less plotted out and more open-ended. I knew the staff in the school and felt happier as there were trusting relationships within the school. I was more confident generally. Ar.*

*By year three we were very confident and wanted to develop our own skills. The initiative was a good way of introducing new staff to this way of thinking. They could absorb this open approach, –some things are non-negotiable! Ma.*

*It hasn't changed our way of working or planning but we now employ a teacher almost like an atelierista. This was a spin off from the project. Ma.*

*To begin with there was a lot of exploratory play. Some people didn't want to change. There were two very enthusiastic staff but even they struggled in year one which was a bit of a disaster. We didn't allow enough time to read all the documentation and get a handle on it. We were a lot happier going into year two and there was more experimentation with documentation. We used Dictaphones that produced a lot of notes – too much really to manage. We've honed that down now and in year three have a much better eye for only recording relevant stuff. My feelings about year three are all good. It's been challenging and stimulating and for me has been the jewel in our crown. We had a shaky start with some illness and the project changed from session to session. But it was exciting and demanding and required all your skills. I'm much clearer about it now, before it seemed complicated but it has become simple. I feel the really important things are only your space or learning environment and the attitude of the adults. Our artist knew this. Pr.*

*I just saw it as a great opportunity. I knew I should be doing more but I wasn't sure how to do it. I didn't feel threatened. Year one was difficult. There was poor morale in my setting and we were badly resourced. I wanted everyone to be involved with the artist but lots of people felt threatened and others didn't want to change. Pr.*

*My work with the children in year two was very illuminating in discussions after sessions with staff. The involvement of the children was subjective and objective. The staff were fascinated by their different view of the children in these scenarios and by children's views of themselves. They valued the activities I was doing with the children – I didn't have to be the teacher. Ar.*

*I was impressed and interested by the way, in Reggio Emilia school and town life mirrored each other and this really led to my approach in year three. I placed a lot of faith in just the ideas and was more prepared to let the project develop as it would. We changed the timetabling which allowed more reflective time not just full weeks of mad creativity that was nice while it lasted. There was a lot more time to reflect and think in between and less preparation beforehand. Ar.*

*You need more time for dialogue and reflection. Longer non-contact sessions would be good but the artist's time with the children is so great and valuable that you don't want to lose any of it. Pr.*

*We developed the corridor area for creative thinking and learning. We do more creative work now. The whole idea of creativity has been extended. It's in everything not just the art activities. Pr.*

*Not so much was invested in other projects as there was in these - this was a step further. It would have been hard to maintain that level – the kids came back so full of it after the artists sessions. Pr.*

*We didn't normally get enough time for discussion although we did set time aside. We developed the idea of having a couple of focused people. Pr.*

*I feel more confident now not to step in and try to teach. Pr.*

*My approach in year three came from a deeper understanding and experience but also the impression that work in the schools I saw in Reggio Emilia had on me. I had a light bulb moment and placed a lot of faith in just ideas in year three and was more prepared to allow a project to develop as it would. Ar.*

*Working with under fives has changed me –as a person, not as an artist. I became more attuned and sensitive to children which helped me give more sophisticated responses. My previous experiences in projects made me more confident to bring stuff in and present it without being directive. It became more subtle. There's been a huge development in how I approach projects that has come through knowing what works. Ar.*

*I just saw this as a great opportunity. I knew that we should be doing something more but I wasn't sure how to do it – I wasn't threatened by it though. Staff morale was low in my setting and I really wanted everyone to be involved with the project and with the artist. Another member of staff became very interested but had difficulties with the anarchic nature of our project and some staff wanted to offer the other children creative opportunities at the same time as the project group. For a couple of years I've felt my role has been quite different. I tend now to create the environment and then watch. There's less talk –I talked far too much before. Now it's about using the observations and documentation and to do with the process not the product. It's totally changed my approach. Pr.*



## 5. Documentation

**One of the most characteristic features of the Reggio Emilia approach is the amount of documentation kept and the use made of it for staff planning and for communication with parents. This requirement makes great demands on staff.**

*We haven't really made changes to our records – it happens and then stops when people leave. There's always lots of reasons why we can't do it and our principles aren't put into practice. The motivation is often lacking in some staff. Pr.*

*We don't usually have the time for this type of project. It showed the need to analyse children's talk –it needs to happen more. The next time we would try to keep on top of documentation. Pr.*

*We see the value of recording children's thinking now and view it differently. There's more insight into that thinking, it's an imperceptible change but we write different things down. Ma.*

One practitioner defined the Reggio documentation

*There's documentation that we keep on all the children and that's quite structured but as for Reggio style documentation –[it's] transcribing, listening, recording what the children thought and using that as a focus for staff discussion and where do we go from here, making decisions about moving and thinking forward, making observations of work that's going on – one person working with the children, one doing observation and then transcribing that - using it for the parents and using it to inform ourselves. Pr.*

Preparing the documentation could be daunting

*We wanted to have the photographs and videos of what we were doing with the children and then we were taping our discussions after the sessions, and bits of those tapes we've transcribed but not all of them. Ideally we would have listened to the tapes and had them transcribed before the next session... Everybody in the project has said we'll get together but .. in fact we haven't reported back in school yet. Pr.*

Another setting used a variety of approaches to look at one outcome of their project.

*The focus definitely was language and the things they said about the room. We wrote exactly what they said about it and put it on the wall. They made up songs about the candles and flames*



*and there was such a lot of imaginative discussion, almost too much to write down. We made a book which is another way of recording. We used the diary approach to all of the project. The parents have written in the diary as well and one of the fathers was so moved by the special room that he went outside and sat and wrote a poem in the car on a little piece of notepaper and brought that in the day after. We used a video- because it was dance we felt video was an appropriate way of capturing the moment- and we took stills as well. And we could show a whole sequence in photographs. Pr.*

There has to be a focus for the observation

*I think you need to know what you're looking for. Sometimes it might be language and sometimes it might be how children interact with each other and sometimes it might be something else, in which case you're looking just for those things. If you're going to write anything down you must think what am I going to do with it, how it's going to inform what next. Sometimes we use formal observation sheets and other times we just write notes on the back of the children's work... And we're taking a lot of photographs. The camera and the digital camera – but there again it's getting it out and downloaded and knowing what you're going to do with it.*

*We've got so much material in the form of documentation – you've got to do it in your own way, have your own system – photographs and also how you store your documentation. We're about to set up a workstation with storage. Whenever we put anything on the walls we put it in display folders but we've got so much stuff like this we haven't had time to write it up. We did a massive big thing on Birds. That could be worked into where we started, what we did next. Ma.*



## 6. Dissemination

**This section focuses on the benefits of the twilight seminar sessions arranged to develop a knowledge base and share understandings but also on the growth generally among participants of the pedagogy of developing creative thinking in the early years.**

*The seminars were always useful and the ideas seemed to fit with my principles and working practice. I found the philosophy behind it confirmed and complimented my rather cloudy ideas. Ar.*

*For me it was a steep learning curve but it has helped validate a lot of what I believe in. Pr.*

*I think there was too much on recording in the initial seminars. It just seemed as if nobody knew what was going on at first. It took two years to really know what we were doing. Pr.*

*They made my head ache! It was intellectualising it too much. I like to work by touch and sense, you don't have to rationalise everything. I have a different range of skills and would naturally adjust provision through observations. I'm not an intellectual. Ar.*

*I wanted all the staff to learn about this and to come and tell me it was good. I sent other staff to the seminars so I could take more people on board. Ma.*

One practitioner had a warning about dissemination.

*We didn't go to Reggio thinking, 'Oh my God, this is pure'. We did admire it but I think there are some people who just glorify Reggio, and that's why I think the dissemination has got to be so careful, the elements that can be valued. Pick out the best and ignore the rest and that's the way we do it. Ma.*

Occasionally there are visitors to the setting to see the work in progress.

*The classic response is, that works for you but it's different for us. They're almost looking for excuses not to do it. Everybody comes back to, and what about your planning, what about your records? There are things we've got to do and there are ways round, particularly with young children. Because children can learn in this way and it is possible to work in this way. It's slowing down and it's listening. Ma.*

*I think the power is learned by being around us. I think it becomes obvious how we deal with the children, how we are with them and we find that people relax into it. It feels strange at first but when they see the way the children are with*



*each other – we have some very challenging children who could be different in different circumstances – but because we try to have a calm and meaningful way and a purposeful way of working the children are obviously working that way. Ma.*

*We tried to disseminate much of what we were doing in the setting through presentations in and out of the setting and staff people were really enthused by the documentation. Some other settings have joined the project following visits to our setting so it does get out. The difficulty is getting those in senior management roles to commit to it. They haven't got a clue. They should come to presentations and see the real changes happening. Pr.*



## Issues Arising

### Understanding the approach

*Comments made, reveal that it takes time to tune in to the approach. Working collaboratively with artists helped open-minded staff to develop and change. Practitioners were able, through the experience of working in this way, to see their own practice from another perspective that encouraged them to question and examine the goal orientated practices encouraged in the UK currently. The incredible enthusiasm that comes through the excerpts about children's engagement in activities illustrates the overall commitment to this approach.*

*It is clear that all three groups, managers, practitioners and artists deepened their understanding in many areas; about reflective approaches to teaching and learning, about working collaboratively and about the inventive and imaginative use of space and time.*

### Collaboration

As the evidence above suggests, in most cases the partnership between artist and practitioner worked well.

*C worked with the staff in the planning and every three or four weeks we would get together to talk about what we were doing and how she felt the children were doing. Ma.*

It can be seen from the evidence cited above that there were mixed expectations of the role of the artist. One setting had the experience of two artists with contrasting styles. Whereas one artist was happy to make provision for all the children in the setting and to consult regularly with all the staff, the other preferred to focus on a specified group.

*I would have liked to work with one member of staff. After, if we'd communicated more through meetings, other staff could have continued it with another group. Ar.*

In another setting there was the unusual arrangement of two artists sharing the time. The practitioner thought that this would enable them to enjoy the support that she enjoyed from teamwork. In the event she was not convinced that this had happened.

In one or two settings, there was a tendency to rely heavily on the involvement of the artist to sustain the project with the resultant possibility of the artist becoming the project - the artist's 'open ended' approach and 'magical' effect on the children were referred to. Whilst clearly demonstrating an awareness of the need for change and development, settings should be cautious of allowing the artist alone to develop this role.

## Sustainability of the innovation

There have been mentions of the problems that arise from staff changes and by implication the problem of ownership of the project. It appeared that the commitment of the setting relied on the autonomy of the staff in the setting. Where staff could allocate space and time without restraint there was greater enthusiasm for the project.



## Conclusion and Recommendations

- *It was impressive that in all the settings visited, from a nursery for very young children with special educational needs to a reception class, there was unanimity in agreeing that all children and adults had benefited from their involvement in the project. The project provided for in depth learning by working closely and attentively with small groups of children. In this context children are able to work from a secure knowledge base allowing them to reach out and extend their knowledge and understanding supported by the adults.*
- By allowing the many voices of children to come through and children's different ways of expressing themselves to be revealed, all children were given a voice. This was especially relevant for those children who are seen usually as being on the margins.
- All adults, practitioners and artists, talked meaningfully about growth in their professional understanding.
- Some settings had experienced more difficulties than others in implementing the initiative. There would appear to be a need for prior discussion about what joining the initiative involves. Perhaps a clearer outline of what is to be offered could be provided. There may well be consideration of fuller discussions with management and a written agreement between the SightLines project and participants to make clear the demands the project will make on resources (space, time, children's access to the project, communication with parents). If new participants could be paired with those who have worked in the project for a couple of years some of the initial learning might be facilitated.
- Guidance and support in approaching, maintaining and utilising documentation seems necessary.
- The level of training of the practitioners appeared to correlate with the successful implementation of the initiative. A further analysis of the needs of staff, and of management systems would be advisable.
- Written accounts of the work that is being done would be valuable in consolidating a shared history. Too much that is good is happening to be wasted. The dual contributions of artists and practitioners open up endless possibilities and new insights into children's learning. This needs to be shared more widely.

One of the practitioners interviewed summed up the benefits of the SightLines Project.

*It's my joy to see them all creative. I think this is one of the reasons why we like SightLines so much because it's a group of people who are going through the same process and coming to the same sorts of conclusions. And so it helps us. We are doing the right thing. We are on the right track here and so we can keep going. We feed from the meetings. And it's teasing out the things that really matter. Ma.*



*These final comments from one of the artists encapsulate the overall feelings, views and ideas that were expressed and communicated through the evaluation.*

It is very different working this way. The value is placed on the process the children are engaged in. The most interesting aspect of the work is to observe, think and speculate about this process. The children are listened to as individuals and this has an enormous effect on their self-esteem and view of themselves as learners especially if they come from a background where this is not necessarily a priority. Help from other children is an integral part of the work – they have a huge capacity for supporting each other appropriately and artists and educators work together to develop sustainable relationships to support children in their development.

Elaine Mason & Anna Duffy. Newcastle Upon Tyne. December 2001