



### **After Reggio – the Derby group's work**

An article by Chris Merrick

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Early in March, at the annual conference for nursery staff in Derby, a group of educators presented their work. For most it was the first time they had ever stood up and talked about their work to others and it was a huge success.

The work began nearly a year ago when the heads of the city's nursery schools, along with some of their staff, joined Sightlines Initiative's study tour to Reggio Emilia in 2013. Enthused and invigorated by what they saw, the heads put together a group of staff to work on a joint project about the city that would put into practice some of the things that had so inspired them in Italy. The project began with a visit to the Riverside gardens with a group of children from each of the nurseries. Staff observed the children's reactions, took photographs, and recorded the children's comments and then, after documenting their group's responses, the staff met again to talk about what they had seen and learned. It was clear that the physical response of the children to the open space had been particularly important, but the children had also been fascinated by the birdlife, the smells of the city streets and height of the council buildings with windows that seemed to reach the sky. The children were also given the opportunity to take photos for themselves and back in the nurseries the children's fascinations were revisited and discussed.

The rich response to the visit included building work in the block areas, reconstructions of the Riverside gardens, drawings and paintings as well as much hopping and standing on one leg like the ducks! At the next group meeting each nursery shared their thoughts and interpretations. Many of the group were impressed by the language that resulted from the discussions with the children and the quality of the work that had been generated. The focus on listening to the children and observing their responses led to the staff generating their own questions about the learning that took place. How important was the children's physical response in developing their understanding of the place? What concepts were the children developing in relation to the city? How could they best respond to this as educators?

Each nursery embarked on further visits: the cathedral, the museum and the football ground. Each time the children's responses were observed, photographed and noted. Each time, documentation was revisited with the children. Photos were projected on the walls of the nursery, displays were created as talking points and children were involved in many different ways of recording their understandings. There were individual developments such as one child's interest in photography, another's curiosity about the portrait of Joseph Wright but always the need to create graphic representations and increasingly sophisticated block structures.

As the staff brought their work together it was clear that the children's learning, driven by their own fascinations, interests and curiosities, had been immense. What was also clear was that the staff too had learned a great deal. They had become much better at listening to the children and appreciated more clearly the juxtaposition of fact and fantasy in the children's perception of the world as they considered sharks and crocodiles in the river Derwent flowing through Derby. They had noted the importance of physicality in the children's responses and the very significant gains in language that resulted from the children's engagement with the world outside the nursery. They also saw the powerful effect of revisiting documentation both for themselves and for the children.

The conference was a wonderful culmination of their work, but it isn't the end. The work completed so far will be brought together in the hope of making the nurseries more visible in the city and showcasing the valuable role they play. For the staff, working together across the city's nurseries has created a core group intent on developing their capacity to listen, to work from children's interests and fascinations and to refine their documentation skills. In April another group will be attending the 2014 study group. Who knows what might happen next....

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