

CHILDREN FIRST CONFERENCE

NATIONAL MUSEUMS LIVERPOOL

4 – 5 November 2005

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It was a well constructed and balanced conference. There was rich diversity in the subject matter, a clear structure, targeted knowledge for the various constituencies and the essential sense of shared vision. It had at its centre a remarkable well articulated exhibition about Reggio Emilia.

Positive quotes from delegates:

The practical ideas I can take back to my setting but also the theory that will lead the development of my centre

Renewed enthusiasm. Enjoyable day. Lots of ideas for the future

Exciting useful venues; a grand day out for hard working practitioners; meeting people of like minds

Reiterated what learning and teaching is truly about - the human spirit!



BACKGROUND

Ownership is always an issue for conference makers. Children First has a powerful and broad based stakeholders group that has managed to key into the broad politics of early years learning.

Early years policy continues to be a leader in education and social policy. Long standing and well respected movements in early years education such as Montessori and of course Reggio Emilia have been quietly influential. They are the surface of a substantial dialogue over many years about *cognitive development*, the *role of the family*, the *design of settings for learning*, the *curriculum* and perhaps the very nature of *pedagogy as a force in society*.

Formal education for early years has now become universal. It has been promoted for years by local councils as part of a universal education suffrage but is now an essential element of childrens service provision. The five criteria of Every Child Matters - *be healthy, be safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well being* were in good measure the product of influential early years champions.

Although bringing early years learning into the formal education system through the Foundation Stage created concern and sometimes alarm amongst educationalists because of the potentially suppressing nature of bureaucracies, it has brought around a valuable rigour of thinking. *Personal, social and emotional development; communication, language and literacy; mathematical development; knowledge and understanding of the world; physical development and creative development* – the six areas of learning in the curriculum guidance, tied to their ‘Stepping Stones’ and aims are amongst the powerful tools available to early years practitioners. The problem for early years, readily identified by the CHILDREN FIRST forum, is to make sure that all practitioners are fitted with the skills and vision needed to deliver first rate early learning environments. This conference aimed to be an element of such learning.

THE CONFERENCE

CHILDREN FIRST focused on creativity and partnerships. It did so in the full knowledge of other movements (around entitlement for example) and political events (Every Child Matters and the future of Sure Start amongst them).

The conference also looked at the dance between theory and practice. One of the key events of the last few years has been the way that educationalists have re-owned theory. Piaget, Maslow and the grand theorists of the mid C20, although still of huge importance, have given way to people such as Daniel Goleman and Howard Gardner. They and others have been influential in allowing educationalists to rethink learning. Joanne Albin Clark and Gill Wright were exemplars in this respect – well established and confident practitioners who actively picked up contemporary theory and put it to practical use in a way that that they may not have done a decade ago.

Joanne's exposition of creative learning was central to conference thinking.

Interestingly, although billed as creative learning, it often looked like a universal methodology - *centrality of exploratory and creative play; understanding multi-modal approaches; observation, observation, observation; interdependency of emotional well-being and involvement; tuning into schematic behaviours; seeing practice through children's eyes and children and adults creating together*. She and other speakers also keyed into two other leif motifs of *risk taking* and having a *permission to learn*. Graham Marsden did the latter very well indeed. His simple workshop about dens will change the practice of dozens of early years practitioners.

The delegacy at CHILDREN FIRST was very broad based. Many were representatives of forum member organisations but a good few came from further afield including a civil servant from the Department of Culture, Media and Sport.

The variety of delegates was interesting. The organisers targeted managers for the Friday programme and grass roots educators (play leaders and nursery staff) for the Saturday programme. It assumed a need for knowledge that was different for each cohort, possibly making the Saturday less a conference than a training day (which the delegates appear to have greatly enjoyed anyway).

Conferences are almost always hybrid, compromised events. They pretend to be a forum in which to share substantial knowledge but haven't the time to do so. They

want to develop dialogue between the delegates but it is often superficial and unsatisfactory. Children First had some of these problems but had the strength of not pretending grand aspirations. The keynote speeches, in their international, national and local progression, were straightforward and were as important as a picture of the cultures of the speakers as for the content.

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KEY NOTES SPEECHES AND PODIUM PRESENTATIONS

Eyes and Silences: setting out a vision for international creative practice in early years

Roberto Frabetti stepped on to the podium first and spoke with moving passion about his work in building and running **La Baracca** at the **Testoni Ragazzi**. Early years specialists will have readily identified with his wonder and respect for very young people. Those of us at a greater distance from day to day contact will have found new understandings.

Roberto reminded the audience of our superficial reliance on language and neglect of other means to communicate and learn. He reminded us of the powerful tacit and the private worlds of humans that are so difficult to understand but are self evident in very young children;

It is the originality of every sign

The little children speak with their eyes and their silences

He provided the delegates with important clues about working in early years settings;

The audience of children under three years old can create a perfectly practical silence

It means diving into a river of emotions

and a mechanism for involvement that is of course, not making adult assumptions but waiting, watching, listening, feeling and understanding how learning is sometimes sudden, sometimes slow and once revealed is always remarkable.

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First Steps to Life and Learning: putting creative practice into a national context

Hopal Romans followed. Hopal, the Executive Officer for Policy and Programmes at **Youth Music**, spoke broadly and often passionately about the values of music on learning.

Youth Music is turning its attention to early years. Its intention, 'To ensure that every child aged 0-5 has access to music making in England', recognises the importance of providing high quality music education from early years onwards.

The organisation is working to understand both demand and supply, knowing the need to equip early years practitioners, whether teachers or musicians.

Hopal described Youth Music's funding streams and urge delegates to think about projects they could support.

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Education as a creative approach to learning and teaching with 0-5s

Joanne Albin-Clark, Early Years Advisory Teacher at Bury LEA, enthused the audience with a fast moving, almost breathless dance through the ways in which children learn and adults, giving structure to that learning, gain insights and the practical tools needed for both to be successful.

Begin, she said, by

- understanding the process – don't be fixated by the intended outcomes
- understanding the needs of the child (and the teacher)
- seeing the needs as comprehensive – as physical, emotional and intellectual
- creating a positive climate for learning and know when children have reached learning moments
- researching, discussing, analysing and designing for a child's needs, drawing on all tools including theory

Joanne gave examples of these in action, looking at children had responded positively when these tasks are undertaken.

What are the implications of such creative approaches. She suggested

- centrality of exploratory and creative play
- understanding multi modal approaches

- observation, observation, observation
- independency of emotional well-being and involvement
- tuning into schematic behaviours
- seeing practice through children's eyes
- children and adults creating together

Roberto and others would have readily recognised these.

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Knowsley

In the first of the case studies **Sarah Haythornthwaite** and **Hilary Keating** described two projects in Knowsley that are proving to be exemplars. They and colleagues combined potentially difficult social, health, education and cultural goals.

Habla con Pepe started out to teach the cultures and language of South America but became something else – a way of engaging very young children in learning a huge raft of subject fields. It was an amazing project where the possibilities grew and the organisers, artists, teachers and others embraced the possibilities. It proved what Creative Partnerships and organisations such as CAPE UK have been working at for a good time now, that partnerships with artists and creative practitioners yield learning far beyond the mere compass of the arts.

I can, You can, We can had a more political (with a small p) aim, to give voice to very young children. There's a nice aphorism *'how is it that a child's first experience of democracy is the school, the most undemocratic state of them all'* (probably Michael Fullan). Hilary Keating, Alistair Scott and others worked with parents, children and their supporters to develop this entitlement to be heard. The result is the well wrought book of the same name.

Both presentations were hugely important. They showed how learning taking place in apparently one curriculum area has huge impact on others. The

Personal, social and emotional development; communication, language and literacy; mathematical development; knowledge and understanding of the world; physical development and creative development of the curriculum guidelines applies in bucket loads to the Knowsley projects.

The Knowsley working formula needs to be shared:

Perseverance; a belief in the importance of respecting each other's professional discipline – the vision of individual officers; an understanding of your local context – economy, geography, demographics; an understanding that new partnerships and new initiatives take time and resources.

And the key statement; KEEP TALKING – AIM HIGH – ENJOY YOURSELVES

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Sefton

Sarah and Hilary were succeeded by another practitioner/teacher. **Gill Wright**, an advisory teacher in Sefton, has been working with others in **Enchanted Garden**, a medium term project to explore the tricky ground between science, creative learning and technology.

Like Joanne Albin-Clark, Gill showed how an active interest in reflective practice, tied to good theoretical constructs, adds huge value to the pedagogy of working with very young children.

The Sefton project is rooted in Reggio Emilia approaches but with the necessary English twist of needing to fit in with Foundation Stage guidance.

The project, very practical in nature, brought very young children and early years practitioners into relationships with artists to make a small number of outdoor works. The children had ownership of the work:

“Creativity is more to do with a process than a product. What a child produces isn't as important as the thinking that went on when it was created. Sometimes there won't be an end product to a creative process.” (Sure Start 2005)

Gill and colleagues applied a diverse set of critical models to the project. Some, such as right and left brain models, are very much of classic thinking

skills orthodoxies. Others were drawn up as the result of the project experience and have great practical strength – *‘creativity involves asking questions, discovery, making choices, curiosity, observing, understanding, playing and thinking’*.

The learning from ENCHANTED GARDEN is significant:

‘From valuing alternative models of communication, children are able to; marvel and discover, deepen their understanding of the world and how it works, experiment with new or use ‘preferred’ languages to express themselves.’

‘What can we learn? – listen to all children’s languages, instil...a love of learning, give time to learn, avoid a ‘one size’ curriculum, value that children learn in different ways and rates, ensure a curriculum which genuinely meets the needs of all children.’

‘The Enchanted Garden project has; forced us to decide what is most important in...meeting the needs of children, challenged us to make the best use of time, made us ‘look up’, listen to and really see children, made us question the appropriateness of six week determined projects and allowed us to value and make effective use of unexpected and unforeseen opportunities.’

And, as Gill reminded the audience, the Reggio thinking about the centrality of children’s views and voices;

The child has
a hundred languages
a hundred hands
a hundred thoughts
a hundred ways of thinking
of playing, or speaking.’

Loris Malaguzzi

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Saturday morning key note speech

Conkers, things and feelings – Linda Thornton and Pat Brunton

Saturday's essentially practical day was started with a spirited key note speech from two educationalists with a long and deep knowledge about early years.

They reported on research on 160 or so very young children living in South London exploiting Reggio Emilia theory in English practice.

Central to this was the appointment of a 'atelierista', an inspired individual with the duty to be producer, director and animateur, free to some extent to walk more freely than the teachers with which they work.

Thornton and Brunton set out some of the conditions for the atelierista – an understanding of physical and mental spaces, *bringing new resources, sharing skills, promoting dialogue and new interactions, supporting other practitioners* and perhaps above all, *making learning visible to children*.

They showed how children had been able to readily frame and reframe their learning, using the experiences of the workshop (the atelier) and constructing a substantial dialogue with their adult supporters.

Perhaps the real message of the speech, which was speedy and given to an audience who either had to stand or sit on the floor, was the importance of planning, reflection and valuing. The speakers made repeated references to a Hundred Languages (see Gill Wright – above).

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How were these presentations received by delegates?

The answer is satisfyingly positive. In the straightforward terms of the evaluation the score was amongst the highest. A vox pops survey produced the same result – people valued the speakers and the opportunity to listen to material that is infrequently heard in a busy working life. It is a reminder of the central value of a conference that delegates get a rare time to reflect on their own practice.

There is a question about whether the key notes speeches formed a critical mass. Structuring one is intensely difficult. Should future early year conferences have more distinctive themes?

The background papers are incredibly useful. Being able to read Roberto's speech for example, added a valuable dimension. A good number of the presentations will turn into excellent briefings for busy teachers.

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WORKSHOPS

The workshops on both days are lumped together here. The commentary is the result of brief visits to most, tied to evaluator reports.

Building a creative environment (practical)

Graham Marsden, Den Maker

We got exactly what is seen on the can with Graham, a carefully thought workshop about the simplest and most basic ideas of den making. It is an art that he has practised successfully for a long time.

The explanation was good humoured, clear and insightful about the needs of young children. Delegates on both days thoroughly enjoyed the making. An inventive lot these early years people. There was a lot of active reflection on the importance and possibilities of den making both directly between delegates and in shared discussion with Graham.

Time and time again, delegates reported positively in the formal feedback.

In working together to make dens; *“I reckon we must have been very bossy when we were kids!”*

Creative Learning Environments (discursive)

Linda Thornton and Pat Brunton (alc associates ltd)

Linda and Pat provided well received descriptions of their research in a South London nurseries and other settings (see the note about their key note speech above), extending the workshop into practical activity.

Working with Artists (practical)

All Things Latin (ATL) - Francisco Carrasco and Freddy Perez

ATL strutted their stuff, drawing delegates into dance, language and culture of South America. Delegate response was first rate. It would be difficult to resist the speaker’s personalities. The workshop made critical points about the need for early years practitioners to be constantly looking outwards in

their repertoire. Tied to the key note presentations, it was a valuable event for all.

Working with Artists (discursive)

Rosie Marcus, Head of Service Artists in Schools, Bolton, Bury & Rochdale

AiS was described by a senior DfES civil servant as a 'jewel'; and it certainly is – a well constructed and managed enterprise that brokers relationships between creative practitioners and schools/early years settings. Rosie's presentation focused on getting the relationship right, no mean feat where it is still a rarity for outsiders to enter the world of classrooms. Practical tools were provided in the literature handed out to all delegates.

Skills and Professional development (practical)

Working with the very young through theatre (practical)

Roberto and Valeria Frabetti – La Baracca – Testoni Ragazzi, Bologna, Italy

These two workshops provided huge insights for the workshop attendees. This author didn't attend the first session but got an insight from a delegate who did. I did go to all of the second workshop.

Valeria and Roberto are craftspeople. They know and practice their trade with huge skill and insight. They laid out the tools of the trade for puzzled, surprised and even worried delegates, challenging them to think about the relationship of body and mind, not too easy for the English, who have only just adapted to greeting each other with circumspect kisses.

They showed how quickly people could, once confident, use their bodies and voices to correspond with their audiences in new ways.

Some of the workshop involved outwards behaviour that has distinct boundaries, touch chief amongst it. Interestingly, older delegates were more comfortable in these tactile exchanges.

Powerful stuff, with many delegates seeing immediate outcomes in their practice.

Patterns in Nature and Clore Natural History Centre resources for group leaders (practical & discursive)

Adam Fryda and Mike Graham

The workshop leaders showed delegates the 'Patterns in Nature' pack for early years offered by NML's Natural History Centre. It led to a valuable discussion about how very young children practically engaged with institutions such as museums. Delegates were particularly concerned about timetabling and transport issues. One solution may be loan boxes.

In feedback the workshop leaders saw more need for marketing their resources to schools. There was a suggestion of establishing a small focus group.

Artbase at National Museums Liverpool – resourcing the Children's Gallery

Ros Appleby

Ros shared practice about the Walker Art Gallery's **artbase**, that provides art/craft and role play opportunities for young visitors in the form of a central practical area and themed trails around the gallery. There was a rich discussion about the use of such resources and their need to provide diverse learning opportunities from the outward going and possibly noisy to quiet and reflective.

"I think this is wonderful"

"Trails are excellent for focusing on specific areas"

Creative Approaches to Literacy

Irene Mandelkow, Liverpool Libraries and Information Service

Irene and colleagues operate the national Bookstart programme in Liverpool. The programme provides books and other written materials to parents to kickstart reading. They market the programme through workshops and library based sessions.

Apart from the practical information for early years practitioners the workshop provided a brilliant account of how impassioned people take up a

key idea and make it work through sheer dint of energy, commitment, reflective thinking and hard work. Delegates were enthused.

Irene Mandelkow was lovely. Her approach was fantastic. Lovely handouts.

**The Enchanted Garden – embedding creative practice in Early Years
(Saturday 10.45 – 12.00 pm only)**

Gill Wright, Dawn McSall, and Sue Gilbertson, Sefton

Gill and colleagues described the project (see keynote speeches above) for workshop delegates, many of whom would not have seen her speech.

Delegates were enthused and engaged in a valued round table discussion that centred on the practical issues of running such projects.

**Museum Busters—introducing practitioners to Museums and early learning
(Saturday 1.00 – 2.15 pm only)**

Mary Roberson, National Museums Liverpool

Mary did fine advocacy in persuading delegates about the power of museums and their ability to connect with very young children, showing how NML exploits its handling collections and works to draw out from participants active dialogues about the objects they are looking at or able to handle.

Setting up a Nursery with Reggio in mind (1.00 – 2.15 pm only)

Sally Croughan, Programme Manager, Clubmoor Nursery and Debbie Hoy

Like Irene and colleagues who led the Bookstart session Sally and Debbie enthused their audience with passion and insightful thinking. They shared their joy and angst in being able to set up a nursery from scratch, balancing pressures to deliver the curriculum and other English bureaucracies against a wish to emulate Reggio Emilia practices. The presentation was very much about the early days and include an interesting explanation about policy and practice (the latter including a description of the power of lightboxes)

Would be good to look at their work over a long period of time.

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LEARNING FROM THE CONFERENCE AND PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

Conferences are distinctly dodgy to organise – they rarely satisfy everyone. Children First did succeed in good measure.

Its strengths are that it:

- was the result of the thinking of a powerful and potentially influential stakeholders group
- had access to a large potential delegate base and achieved good numbers
- had a sense of shared vision through the presence of the Reggio Emilia exhibition and a critical mass of workshops that explored practical partnerships between early years settings and the cultural/arts sectors
- was in a great city centre and culturally rich location
- had a critical mass of great presenters and speakers of whom I pick out Graham Marsden, Joanne Albin Clark and the Frabettis.

Its weaknesses were:

- problems with multiple locations, registration and some services
- difficulty in understanding an underlying theme (was it arts, culture, creativity, a sell of Reggio Emilia?)
- too few reflective moments, even in the workshops
- workshops that were diverse but not connected by theme or polemic
- two disconnected days because of different audience reach – managers and grass roots practitioners didn't effectively mix
- background papers not available
- may not have reached out to the full community of interests

There are positive discussions about making Children First an annual event. It could be a very powerful device for Merseyside. The planning needs to be about:

1 Advocacy

1.1 So a conference is unashamedly used to remind the education, cultural, economic and social sectors about the importance of early years learning and creativity

1.2 To celebrate existing and emerging activity (and the personalities who championing the action) – a proposal from a delegate;

Giving children the opportunity to speak and express themselves in a variety of mediums. To allow children to experience more music & dance, especially live music.

1.3 Support political or change that may be current, for example, ideas around entitlement

1.4 share distinctive ideas such as theory into practice

2 Continuing professional development

2.1 So the conference is a distinct part of CPD strategies and is relevant

2.2 Produces discussion papers and other practical tools that will be used throughout the succeeding year

2.3 Fits the Foundation Stage curriculum as closely as possible and provides evidence for such

3 Knowledge sharing

3.1 To make sure knowledge about contemporary issues are fully shared

3.2 Be a forum where key ideas are discussed formally and informally

3.3 Be a forum where there is space for everyone's practice to be shared

3.4 Grow relationships with the rest of the world – this year's new connections with Roberto and Valeria are extended over the next few years to include a very large community of interests.

Barry Hepton

November 2005

<http://www.barryhepton.com>

Last words from delegates:

Can't wait to get back and make a den

It was great to see the opportunities for working together creatively by the museums. I'll be planning a visit to the Clore Natural History Centre!