

# How to Catch a Moonbeam and Pin It Down: Understanding and Developing Creativity in Early Childhood Settings



**Final Report**  
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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS INTRODUCING THE 'MOONBEAMS' PROJECT

### 1. Why the Project was Necessary

*'...to have a good life, it is not enough to remove what is wrong from it. We also need a positive goal, otherwise why keep going? Creativity is one answer to that question: It provides one of the most exciting models for living...if the next generation is to face the future with zest and self-confidence, we must educate them to be original as well as competent.' Csikszentmihayli, 1997:11*

The UK is currently experiencing a period of rapid expansion, improvement and transformation in the provision of opportunities for the care and education of the very young (Pascal, Bertram et al, 2003, 2004; DfES, 2004b). An important aspect of these developments has been the introduction of the Foundation Stage Curriculum Framework and the Birth to Three Matters Framework for children from birth to five plus. In both of these frameworks, the development of creativity in young children is emphasised and the guidance (DfES/QCA, 2000, 2004a) suggests that in order to facilitate creative development, young children could have the opportunity to work alongside artists and other creative adults. Current policy is also providing support for the development of partnerships and multi-agency networks in the delivery of the expanded services (DfES, 2004b). Within some of these networks, there are developing opportunities for artists to contribute to early years education. Early childhood arts are expanding on two axes – by *age*, to include under-threes and by *diversity*, to include a greater range of 'settings' and providers (Young, 2003). There has also been an increasing interest in exploring Malaguzzi's ideas (Malaguzzi, 1993), as embodied within the 'Reggio Emilia' approach to pedagogy in the early years curriculum. This innovative Northern Italian approach has stimulated experimentation with 'artists in residence' in many early years settings in the UK in recent years (Pascal, Bertram et al, 2003).

There remain a number of challenges to be faced within the early childhood sector if effective arts education is to be realised in practice, and the central role of creativity in the curriculum for young children is to be fully recognised. These challenges include:

- the continuing emphasis on early literacy and numeracy in many settings, which can lead to a 'bolt on' approach to work on creativity;
- a lack of professional training within the early years sector, which can lead to a tendency to follow curriculum guidelines rigidly rather than exploring innovative and flexible approaches to creativity and the arts with young children;
- the performance driven climate, which can lead to a focus on producing evidence for the Early Learning Goals or funding targets (and favour outcomes over process);
- a poor understanding of the role of creativity, or even how to use basic arts skills, by many early years practitioners and providers;
- a lack of confidence by both practitioners and the arts sector about how to work effectively together;
- a lack of clarity on employment routes and appropriate professional input for the arts sector, and a lack of access to early years networks for artists (Sharp, 2001; Churchill Dower, 2003);
- a lack of robust evaluation evidence to inform the development of policy and effective practice to support the further development of arts education and creativity in young children.

It is within this national and local climate that Birmingham LEA instigated the 'How to Catch a Moonbeam and Pin It Down' Project. The work grew out of an ongoing and serious exploration of the

'Reggio Emilia' approach within early years settings in the city, and also a stated aim by the LEA to enhance the profile of creativity in young children's learning and development from birth. This Final Report of the 'Moonbeams' Project provides evidence of 'innovation in action' within Birmingham early years settings that are both multi-ethnic and sector-diverse. It was an innovation that operated through a collaboration of local authority officers, early years practitioners, professional artists and academic researchers working within the City. It is hoped that the Project experience will make a valuable contribution to furthering our understanding of both the potentials and challenges of supporting creativity in young children through the use of 'artists in residence' in a range of early years settings.

## 2. What the Project Aimed to Do

The 'Moonbeams' Project was essentially a research and professional development initiative that was intended to improve the quality of learning for young children within the City. It set out to achieve this by providing enriched creative interventions and experiences in, and through, the arts for children from birth to four years in a range of formal and informal early years settings. The Project recruited professional artists and early childhood practitioners, with a cross-section of experiences to work together on this initiative.

The Project title, *How to catch a moonbeam and pin it down*, was chosen to convey the overarching objective of attempting to catch (and nurture) the essence of young children's creative activity, which, ~metaphorically like moonshine~, can be perceived as elusive and ephemeral. It was also explicit in adopting approaches to practice learnt from the nursery schools in the Emilia region of Northern Italy (Edwards et al, 1993). Primarily this influence emphasises child-initiated approaches and documentation as a process of looking closely at children's activity in interaction with materials, with one another and with adults (Rinaldi, 2001). Young children are encouraged to explore their environment and express themselves through all of their available 'expressive, communicative and cognitive languages' whether they be words, movement, drawing, painting, building, sculpture, shadow play, collage, dramatic play, or music. A key part of Reggio Emilia settings is the existence of spaces, which are 'rich in materials, tools and people with professional competencies' (Malaquzzi, 1993).

In addition, the 'Moonbeams' Project research aimed:

- to document, reflect upon and analyse the experimental arts activities, led by the artist in residence, in each of the Project settings;
- to provide informed support which would enhance the reflection and dialogue between the artist, the early years practitioners and the researcher in each early years setting, in order;
- to generate knowledge and understandings which would support the further development of quality practice in creative learning throughout the City.

The evidence gathered by the research team was focused on a set of agreed research questions organised around 6 overall themes or strands, where it was felt that current knowledge was lacking (detailed below). The findings from the research are presented in this Final Report using this investigative framework.

### 1. Creativity in young children:

- What is creativity?
- What is arts education?

- How might we describe the development of creativity in young children?
- Can we assess the development of creativity in young children?
- How can creativity be developed and nurtured in young children?

## 2. The work of 'artists in residence':

- Who are the 'artists in residence'?
- What are the training, experience, skills and expertise of the artists?
- What are the aims and purpose of the artists who work in early years settings?
- What are the expectations and aspirations of the 'artists in residence'?

## 3. The artistic context of early years settings:

- What are the characteristics of the settings in which the artists are working?
- What are the expectations and aspirations of the settings to the artists input?

## 4. The pedagogical actions of artists in residence:

- How do artists operate in early years settings? What do they do with young children and practitioners?
- What pedagogical skills does this work require?
- What is the relationship and interactions of the artists with babies/young children?

## 5. The educational/developmental response of young children and other adults to the actions:

- What is the response of babies/young children to the artistic activity?
- What is the response of the practitioner to the artistic activity?

## 6. The impact of artists in residence on children and practitioners:

- What is the impact of the artists input on babies/young children, in terms of creativity and other aspects of development?
- What is the impact of the artists input on parents/carers?
- What is the impact of the artists input on practitioners?

## PART TWO: REFLECTIVE DIALOGUES

Reflective dialogues between all the participants were a core element of the Project design throughout the two-years of the 'Moonbeams' Project. Professional reflection is an important feature of the 'Reggio' approach, and is also recognised within Birmingham LEA as being at the heart of excellent practice, in which 'praxis' or 'reflection and action' are intertwined to ensure the development of quality services (Pascal, Bertram, 2004).

The 'Moonbeams' reflective dialogues took place at setting level, between a particular artist, the setting practitioner(s), the artist-documenter and the researcher; and also at Project level, through the scheduling of thrice yearly Reflection Days, during which all Project participants came together to share experiences, ideas and issues. Sometimes the dialogues were stimulated by a series of inputs from Project participants, sometimes they focused on the documentation being generated by participants, and sometimes they were just focused and extended conversations on a range of themes.

These reflective dialogues were recorded and have been analysed by the research team. The analysis reveals not only the range of professional issues that the Project participants critically and reflectively discussed, but also the depth of professional exchange that the Project stimulated. The dialogues have been grouped according to the following 10 themes, under which the key debates that ran through the Project reflections are summarised:

### 1. Working in partnership

2. Communication and relationships
3. Context: location, resources, climate
4. Pedagogical approach
5. Documentation
6. Assessment
7. Working with parents/carers
8. Professional development
9. Impact
10. Dissemination and sustainability

## 1. Working in Partnership

The 'Moonbeams' Project set out to explore how professional artists might work effectively over an extended period of time with early childhood practitioners in order to foster creativity in young children. At the heart of the Project, and central to its effectiveness, was the development of an effective professional partnership between the artists and the practitioners within the settings. The nature of this partnership, and the factors which enabled it to work, became a dominant theme in the reflective dialogues throughout the Project. Analysis reveals the particular and individual contributions of the artists and practitioners, and the subtleties of working effectively in partnership, which are highlighted in the following points:

- Having an artist working in residence both extends and challenges practice within the setting and can act as a catalyst for significant change.
- The role of the artists within the setting is seen as being different, and capable of adding value to the work of the practitioner.
- The artists' and practitioners' skills should complement each others, not conflict or duplicate.
- The artists bring additional skills and ideas into the setting that are arts based and intended to stimulate creative responses in children.
- The artists are practised at leading on from what the children do and this process involves 'reading' the children's activity in certain art-full ways. It also requires good improvisation skills.
- The artists use their own performance skills to model art in action and this, in turn, extends children's activities, and also models ways of doing things for practitioners. They operate as role models for both the children and the practitioners.
- The partnership between the artists and practitioners took time to establish and evolved significantly over the time of the Project. During the second year of the Project the partnerships were, for the most part, much more collaborative between artists and practitioner, with the artists having learnt a lot about sharing the work, about valuing the practitioner and not just doing their own thing.
- There is not a blue print for effective partnership work but there was a cross-fertilisation of ideas and approaches from the different settings and artists.
- The artists bring particular attributes to the partnership, which include a freedom to work in ways that are unfettered by 'teaching' objectives or OfSTED demands and so can make a contribution, which is very different to the practitioner.
- The artist does need to use specific artistic skills, such as thinking laterally, being tuned into the unexpected and intuition, eccentricity, freedom, breaking down barriers, taking risks, but they also use observation, scaffolding, modelling and other teaching skills.
- The artist needs to have a sense of being 'with' the children and displaying a sense of play.

- The artist has the opportunity to work with smaller groups of children than the practitioner and this opens up new possibilities for the learning process.
- For the partnership to work well there needs to be open communication, a process of learning and sharing experiences.
- The role of the practitioner is to set up the context and support the relationship between the artist and children, and also to provide continuity when the artist is not there between visits.

## 2. Communication and Relationships

The relationship between Project participants was dynamic and developmental throughout the life of the Project. The reflective dialogues indicated that there was clearly an emotional aspect to the relationships which developed, particularly between the artists and the children. These relationships were enhanced because of the extended time in which the artist was working in the setting. The challenges of establishing effective communication strategies were also well documented in the dialogues, detailed below:

- There is a vital need for the practitioners and managers within a setting to establish a rapport with the artist, and to put in place open lines of communication.
- The artists were seen by other Project participants as creative communicators with a natural ability to influence mood, ideas, approaches.
- Central to both communication and developing relationships were ongoing conversations – verbal, non-verbal, emotional and intellectual.
- The practitioners saw themselves as the ‘guardians’ of the children who had to make sure the relationship between the artist and children was good.
- Setting managers were identified as key facilitators and information channels for the Project to work.

## 3. Context: Location, Resources, Time and Climate

Each of the Project settings was unique and brought its own set of challenges to the artists and practitioners involved. There were several lengthy dialogues about the appropriateness of certain kinds of setting for this work and of the importance of developing an open climate with priority and resources given to the work on the Project.

- Although the Project worked effectively in most kinds of early childhood setting, there were exceptions to this e.g. hostels and refuges, assessment centres.
- Time is important, (particularly at the beginning of the Project) for artist and setting to find out about each other and the children.
- The settings were very variable in terms of space, resources and environment. The artists had to use the context very flexibly to make it work.
- Many artists developed their own resources for use on the Project and this gave the items significance for the practitioners, parents and children.
- The attitudes of leaders and management teams within the settings in creating an open ethos in which artist and practitioner could innovate were seen as an absolutely critical inhibitor or enhancer of the Project action.

## 4. Pedagogical Approach

The Project clearly set out to explore a particular pedagogical approach to creative learning, but also to encourage innovation and experimentation. The reflective dialogues explored in depth what a 'Reggio' approach meant and how far the artists and practitioners were able to develop and extend their creative practice.

- There was a strong debate about how far the artists and practitioners were free to enable children to extend, develop and manage their own ideas, and the extent of autonomy that was possible given central Government demands and requirements for accountability.
- Both artists and practitioners needed confidence to take their own initiative and to fully explore and innovate within the Project.
- Artists also emphasised the need to follow the child's interests and needs rather than coming in with predetermined agendas. All identified the need to allow children to take their own initiatives (ownership) and how this can best be supported and stimulated by the artistic input to generate creative responses by children.
- As the Project developed its work and action seemed to become much more diffuse, slightly less well-formed, less 'project-like' but many participants saw this as a good sign in that it flowed from following children's lines of activity more, which were more fluid and flexible.
- The Project participants emphasised the importance of narrative forms within the Project work on creativity, also a need to focus on symbolic activity for young children in all art forms.
- The participants were keen to point out that there are certain traditions of early years practice, which predicate against creative, spontaneous responses.
- There are challenges and limitations that the participants found in giving children responsibility and space to develop their own ideas.
- There was some agreement that it was easier for artists take more and different risks. Discussion showed that it was often easier for artists to 'do naughty things'! (The practitioners are more constrained by curriculum demands, by their role, and by how they are expected to work with children?) Also there was some feeling that artists were more comfortable with potential chaos?

## 5. Documentation

The importance of documentation of practice and children's responses was evident in the dialogues. Some participants were confident with the documentation process while others found it very difficult to understand and manage. Many of the dialogues revolved around how to effectively document action and the challenges in selecting what to document(?). However, most participants did give this aspect of the Project priority and acknowledged its importance to the development of effective creative practice.

- Many participants felt the documentation gave their work on the Project rigour and structure, which they appreciated.
- Many were only just beginning to understand and become confident with the new technology to support documentation, particularly digital imaging and electronic recording.

## 6. Assessment

Assessment of creativity proved to be a very contentious aspect of the Project. Some participants found the whole notion of assessment alienating and unhelpful, while others championed its value. The dialogues explored the issues around assessment.

- There was much debate by practitioners about how to get the Foundation Stage profiling out of the work with artists.
- Assessing creativity in under threes was seen as particularly problematic.
- Qualitative and observation based approaches to assessment were preferred by participants.

## 7. Working with Parents/Carers

The Project did not set out specifically to work with parents but because of the nature of some of the settings inevitably parents became part for the action and focus for the artists and practitioners.

- Participants agreed that more work needed to be done on working with parents and carers.
- There were sometimes tensions for the artists about whether adults or children were the focus of their input.
- Many participants saw great benefits in involving parents, which paid off for the children within their home context.
- The Project was capable of changing the nature of the parent's role and parenting skills.

## 8. Professional Development

The contribution of the Project to the professional development of practitioners and artists was clearly evident in the dialogues. The analysis reveals that through the Project the sensitivity of practitioners has been increased as they developed skills of observation, and became better able to look at different art forms, more aware of possibilities and of intervention strategies.

- The benefits of action research Projects like Moonbeams as a professional development activity was widely acknowledged within the Project participant group.
- All wanted more input on the 'Reggio' approach and on the documentation process.
- Practitioners indicated that they had increased their observation, and reflection skills and art forms (as well as ?) their understanding of art forms.

## 9. Impact

The Project dialogues provided clear evidence of the impact of the Project on the individuals involved and also on the settings who participated in both Phase 1 and 2.

- Many felt the Project had raised the status of the work on creativity and had raised people's expectations.
- It had also given people a stronger sense of what is valuable in early years.
- The Project provided 'shocking experiences' (in a positive sense) for some settings and stimulated 'clashes', which had positively shaken up thinking and acted as a catalyst for change.



- The impact was varied and included attitudinal change, environmental change, programme change, pedagogical change and culture transformation.
- There was evidence that the Project has reinforced and strengthened the capacity of practitioners to fight their corner about what matters.

## 10. Sustainability and Dissemination

During Phase 1 there was dialogue about how to keep the creative experiences going while the artist was not there. As the Project came to an end during the second phase, there was much discussion about the sustainability of the work, and how the learning might be disseminated more widely.

- There was some concerns about continuity and keeping the project alive when the artist wasn't present – taking it on during the other days, influencing practice and influencing the role as a practitioner.
- The best ways of continuing the 'knowledge development and 'taking it everywhere to influence others practice' was a strong concern of participants.
- The challenges of ensuring the small group work could be sustained in settings was an ongoing topic of dialogue,
- The fairness of the artists doing something with everyone within a setting rather than targeted on small groups of children was also discussed.
- It was felt that there is a layer of what the artists do which everyone can do, but that there was also a deeper layer, which others couldn't do.
- Participants were concerned about sustainability in the contexts in which the Project had operated and also how to expand out and work with the whole setting and other settings to disseminate the learning.

