

All about ...

children in the community

Amid criticism of the proposed Early Learning Goals, **Meredith Jones Russell** finds out how the European BRIC project put community at the heart of learning experiences



Above and overleaf: The Fitzwilliam Museum and Botanic Garden project 'My Nursery is at the Museum and Garden'

As the pilot EYFSP beds down in 25 schools across the country, sector concerns about the proposed goals continue to mount – chiefly about their disregard for experiential learning and focus on acquiring knowledge through books. This is particularly true of the goals within Understanding the World (see box).

While the educational programme refers to the importance of children's 'personal experiences', the goals place a heavy emphasis on children learning about their community and roles in society through

stories and non-fiction texts. The vision is in stark contrast to a significant European project which aimed to make children visible and active members of their local communities and so increase their 'democratic engagement in public spaces'.

The Young People, Public Spaces and Democracy (or BRIC) Project ran in England, Sweden and Italy from 2014-2017 and involved taking groups of children from participating nurseries on trips to explore three types of public spaces:

- the street, footpath or equivalent
- an indoor space such as a library
- a green outdoor space such as a park.

The trips were not one-off outings but regular visits to the same place, designed to encourage sustained interaction with spaces and people within the community.

The project set out to make children 'democratic citizens' in their own neighbourhoods, which it defined as:

- being taken seriously
- having the right to see the world from different perspectives
- being able to affect what happens in these public spaces
- being affected by what happens in these public spaces.

Professor Tim Waller of Anglia Ruskin ▶

EYFS best practice

University, who led the project, says, 'Our argument is that children live in a community and participate in it, so they need to be seen in those spaces, interact in them, and learn from an early age that these spaces are for them as well.'

'Unless you are a parent or grandparent, you wouldn't necessarily know children were around. Obviously, in some areas there is specific play equipment for children, but there are places that are not necessarily designed for or thought of as being for young children, and we think they nonetheless have every right to be in them.'

'It's about visibility, and children being active within democracy. Democracy is not just about casting your vote, but about how you live your life. Before we are old enough to learn what democracy means, it is about simply living within a community, and that starts from birth.'

ENGAGEMENT

Two strands of engagement were encouraged in the project. Community engagement could take place as part of an event, such as a nursery participating in a Christmas celebration in a local square, or as something more spontaneous, such as a conversation with a member of the public.

Following a pilot in 2014, a further strand of engagement called traces was developed. Children were encouraged to leave a 'trace', or mark, on their trips as a reminder of their presence. Traces were defined as 'a gentle mark left either intentionally or unintentionally that can be discerned by others after the event, even temporarily', or as 'a memory that someone takes with them from experiences in the public space'. In practice, they ranged from chalk marks on the pavement to exhibitions of children's work at local libraries and bookshops.



Professor Waller explains, 'The importance of leaving traces developed from a discussion with our Italian colleagues who planted a maze 20 years ago, and the children who helped now come back as adults to see it. We talked about leaving traces that can be shared across the generations, whether that is

through drawings, discussions, or more permanent traces.'

Nicola Wallis, a teacher at Beach Babies Day Nursery in Cambridge, adds, 'The pilot showed traces were important as part of the broader aim of making children more visible. We tend to hide them away, educating them

Pilot EYFS: Understanding the World

Educational programme

The frequency and range of children's personal experiences increases their knowledge of the world around them – from visiting parks, libraries and museums to meeting important members of society such as police officers, nurses and firefighters. In addition, listening to a broad selection of stories, non-fiction, rhymes and poems will foster their understanding of our culturally, socially and ecologically diverse world...

ELG Past and Present

Children at the expected level of development will:

- talk about the lives of the people around them and their roles in society
- know some similarities and differences

between things in the past and now, drawing on their experiences and what has been read in class

- recall some important narratives, characters and figures from the past encountered in books read in class.

ELG People, Culture and Communities

Children at the expected level of development will:

- describe their immediate environment using knowledge from observation, discussion, stories, non-fiction texts and maps
- know some similarities and differences between different religious and cultural communities in this country, drawing on their experiences and what has been read in class
- explain some similarities and

differences between life in this country and life in other countries, drawing on knowledge from stories, non-fiction texts and – when appropriate – maps.

ELG The Natural World

Children at the expected level of development will:

- explore the natural world around them, making observations and drawing pictures of animals and plants
- know some similarities and differences between the natural world around them and contrasting environments, drawing on their experiences and what has been read in class
- understand the effect of the changing seasons on the natural world around them.

case study: Beach Babies Day Nursery, Cambridge



'We became involved with the Tithe Barn, a medieval building that is not open to the public,' explains nursery teacher Nicola Wallis. 'It's inaccessible by road, so most people don't even know it's there. One of the parents at the nursery was a trustee so she arranged our visits.'

'We engaged with the path on the way, and the children would take ages to get there, leaving semi-permanent traces, like nests made out of grass and acetate sheets to leave artistic interventions on lamp posts. They didn't last for ages, but long enough that the children's families could go past and see them.'

'The children engaged with the history in the barn, like the unique brickwork on the floor, and planted wheat seeds in a trough to leave a trace and link us with history. Members of the volunteer group at the barn came with us. They observed how the children explored the space using their bodies and how they used watercolours to paint it.'

'We had the same snack every time of breadsticks, and asked the children to give one tenth of them to the adults, to help them understand what a tithe was. The Tithe Barn needed funding to reopen and our engagement helped to promote it and demonstrate an interest in it. The children became very emotionally

connected with how to save it. Once a visit was cancelled because an architect said it was structurally unsound, and the children got very worried about the wobbly walls. One child said he was good at building and offered to help, and we did a cake sale to raise money. The nursery is still involved with the campaign today.'

'It was too far for our two- and three-year-olds to walk to the barn, so our focus with them was a local village sign of a great-crested newt, which can be found in the area. On one visit, we found a 50p coin and one child suggested we gave it to the newt. We put it between its fingers and would always check it was still there. It was just a tiny trace which no-one else would notice, but we knew.'



separately from other parts of society, so this helped to redress the balance if they can't be in the space permanently. It was not a one-way process, as traces were also reflected in children and staff in their emotional connections and memories, or sometimes in items they could take away, so there was an impact on them as well as by them.'

SHARING GOOD PRACTICE

BRIC aimed to achieve an exchange of 'good practice' among pre-school practitioners within and between the three countries involved. In England, early years practitioners from Under Fives Roundabout Pre-School and Beach Babies Day Nursery in Cambridge, Whitehills Nursery School, Parklands Nursery School and Croyland Nursery School and Day Nursery in Northampton, and Chase Lane Primary School and Nursery Unit in Waltham Forest, all participated in the project – alongside six pre-schools in Gothenburg, Sweden and six in the Bassa Reggiana area of Italy.

Professor Waller says, 'We wanted to make sure we had representation from all the different types of nurseries, with private, voluntary and state-funded, and one which had heavy involvement with childminders too, because they are an important part of provision, so there was a range of approaches.'

As a result of the project, a set of guidelines for community engagement has been produced, while a documentation centre and open forum form part of the BRIC website and aim to continue the work of the original project. The project leaders from each of the three countries also gave the keynote at the European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA) Conference in Budapest in August this year.

Professor Waller says it has been 'very pleasing' to see the project's legacy. He says, 'Taking the children out into the three focus spaces has carried on and become embedded in practice at all the settings. We have a private Facebook page for all the practitioners involved and all the relationships continue.'

INTERNATIONAL APPROACHES

Every four months, the practitioners took part in a study exchange to see first-hand what was happening in the partner

countries and learn from each other's experiences. 'There was a big difference in context,' says Professor Waller. 'There were many more staff and resources in the pre-schools in Italy and Sweden. The pre-schools in the UK were much more defined by their status as private, voluntary or state-supported. Private settings had more staff where state-run had fewer and were more pushed for time.'

The EU funding paid for transnational visits to allow all the teachers to visit each location twice in the life of the project. 'Meeting our colleagues in other countries was invaluable and helped us compare and draw on experiences,' says Ms Wallis. 'I was very influenced by inspiration I took from them. We often start to develop blind spots about what is possible, and when you see others doing things differently and nothing bad happens, it gives you the confidence to try new things.'

'It motivated us to be braver. In Italy

EYFS best practice

they took out ten two-year-olds with one adult and it was fine. It made us wonder whether our ratios are sensible.'

Jo Summers, assistant head teacher at Croyland Nursery School and Day Nursery in Wellingborough, says ratios were reconsidered in Northampton as well. 'In Sweden, children were outside the setting all the time, sometimes with only one teacher. We are very hot on ratios here, more down to adult fears than children's, but the project made us take a step back and ask why.'

'A ratio of one to two limits us as there are not many days we can staff that. So, we looked at the regulations and it didn't specify that ratio anywhere, as long as children were safe and practitioners were comfortable. Now we go out with a ratio of about one to five. Because the children go out every week they feel comfortable, and they always wear hi-vis jackets. We reasoned that if a parent has five children, they would still go outside.'

Ms Summers adds, 'I found the approach to childcare in Sweden much more child-led, so we took that on here. When we get to a junction now we ask the children which way to turn. Before, staff held children's hands; now we let them walk ahead of us.'

'In Italy they had very good links with the community, with a huge central square children could run around. Because we are in a small town, there is not so much to do in the community and it is harder to make links, whereas the way they are set up makes it much easier.'

Ms Wallis, whose nursery is four miles outside Cambridge, agrees. 'At the beginning of the project we felt we had nothing to use compared to the other countries. They had enormous town squares with fountains, or a nearby forest. But we realised a community is not about how amazing the place is. There is always something amazing in it. As adults we have preconceptions, but what we think could be dull or too difficult for children to understand can actually really intrigue them. We raised our expectations as a result.'

CHALLENGES

Despite lessons learned by the international trips, some English practitioners faced



The 'My Nursery...' project visited the Botanic Gardens in Cambridge

difficulties accessing them. Professor Waller explains, 'We did have people drop out of trips due to staffing crises, even when tickets had been booked and paid for. Of course, they had to put their school first, but this didn't happen in Italy or Sweden, where they had enough people to fill the gaps.'

'While in Sweden and Italy they could adapt easily to the BRIC approach and make it part of their practice, in England practitioners had to do it on top of everything else, such as paperwork and preparing for Ofsted. Their workload was noticeably different, partly due to staffing. Frankly, the funding model in the UK is so flawed and chaotic, state nurseries in particular were under a lot of pressure. Ultimately, community engagement should be a mindset thing, it shouldn't need resources, but it does require enough adults to accompany the children to go out.'

There were some other complications for nurseries involved in the project, including difficulties with local residents. In one instance, explains Professor Waller, 'Some children were walking through a housing estate and had taken chalks to draw on the pavements and walls. Someone came out of their house and asked why the children weren't in school and why they were doing graffiti. The teacher explained, but this

person took umbrage, taking the view that children should be inside school, not seen and not heard.'

'In the end, the teacher invited the person into the school to explain about the project and show the work the children had done. This actually ended up being a great example of bringing the community in to the nursery, which was exactly the reason for the project in the first place.'

ACROSS THE GENERATIONS

Forging links between the generations was one unexpected benefit of the project. Professor Waller says, 'We underestimated the intergenerational possibilities of the project at the start. Several nurseries still continue intergenerational visits, going weekly to their local care home. That is a direct result of BRIC and something very positive.'

'The transport element was significant in establishing these relationships, as while children usually travelled to nursery by car, these regular trips out meant they might get the same train or bus with an older generation at the same time each week, or walk past the same people sat on a bench. This generated conversations, and both generations really looked forward to that.'

At Croyland, the staff take two-year-olds

community engagement: top tips

1. Have the confidence to take the first step – just do it!
2. Remember young children and adults benefit from regular visits to the same public spaces over a period of time and across different seasons.
3. Include places not specifically designed for young children.
4. Consult children and parents on which public spaces to visit.
5. Leave children free to explore and make sense of the space – there is no need to make elaborate plans.
6. Document aspects of the visit to share with parents and community members, including politicians.
7. Encourage children to express what they have experienced to help them become responsible for a place and develop and sustain relationships with people they frequently encounter.
8. Discuss how children may leave an appropriate mark or 'trace' in the public spaces visited.
9. Organise regular activities involving young children and community members, especially older members, as these are mutually beneficial.
10. Encourage community members to visit your setting to share experiences of public spaces.
11. Hold at least one annual community event with children in a public space.

Adapted from the BRIC Project's key recommendations

case study: Croyland Nursery School and Day Nursery, Wellingborough

'When we started the project we took a group of six or seven children, but it quickly evolved. Now we take 18 to 20 children out every week on what we call Welly Wednesdays,' explains assistant head Jo Summers.

'We had an initial training day where we went into our local area to see what learning could take place. We quickly realised learning opportunities were everywhere, even at the garage at the top of the road where children can watch a tyre being changed. There are so many things that just happen off the cuff. Once the children were really interested in a lady doing her garden, so we stopped to talk to her and she showed us what she was doing and told us about all the different flowers.'

'The main thing is getting children out in the community, and thinking about what their voice is, what they can reach, and what we all have in common.'

'Going out has impacted staff confidence. Initially, they worried about not being able to do enough of a risk assessment. But you're doing risk assessments constantly without even being aware of it. There could always be

something unexpected; you can't predict things. You might see a dog or someone might talk to you. We do a lot of work on stranger danger and protective behaviours and teach children that we always say hello but we don't need to talk to everyone.'

'We still do risk assessments, and staff have a checklist of things to consider, like ratios, additional needs, packing inhalers and so on, but they never walk the route beforehand. It's about the journey and what we might see on the way. Sometimes we just walk round the block, and the children love it.'

'Initially, we took only fee-paying children out as they were in nursery all day and usually brought in by car so weren't confident or used to walking. But now they know Wednesday is walking day and they've become confident walkers, happy to go out and engage with people. We now include Welly Wednesdays in our introduction evening for new parents, and explain children will be expected to walk from the outset. It becomes something that isn't even a special event, it's just another thing we do.'



on weekly visits to their local care home, along with musical instruments and books. Ms Summers says, 'It's a lovely link. It wasn't easy to set up as we had to call quite a few different homes. There were lots of concerns about risk assessments, but we want to show there is no need to be scared of children – we're OK!'

BRIC has also made a connection with international intergenerational project Together Old and Young (TOY). Professor Waller has written a blog for them and hopes future iterations of BRIC might work closely with the Dutch project. He also hopes to see links between generations explored further in England, as the BRIC project observed in Sweden, where care homes and pre-schools are increasingly being built on shared premises.

'Often pre-schools are on the ground floor and care homes on the first,' he explains. 'This collaboration is a good thing and benefits both generations. Quite often in

family life, children don't spend enough time with their grandparents, for example if they live in different parts of the country.'

POLICY

A specific aim of the BRIC project was to engage with key community stakeholders, including local politicians and business representatives. Each country had a turn at holding an open forum to tell the local community about the project, to which a range of community members was invited.

Swedish company Jernhusen, inspired by hearing about children's regular visits to Gothenburg Central Station, has set up an urban gardening programme across all their stations to encourage children to see them as places communities meet and work together, promoting civic involvement through sharing a space.

'We wanted to make politicians aware of the project as well,' says Professor Waller. 'Generally they were supportive, although cynically I would say they seemed much keener to attend around election time. UNESCO is now looking to incorporate the ideas of BRIC into its early childhood care and education work, and there is evidence that children and families have been invited to more public events in Italy, and to events in public squares in Gothenburg, as a result of the project. Ultimately, children being visible within the community can be achieved through policy.'

'In England there is a lot of pressure on teachers to focus on literacy and numeracy, and for that to take place inside schools in a certain type of way. But, of course, it's possible for this to happen in public spaces, which are not exploited enough, and that could be emphasised in policy. In Sweden, parents get two or three days extra annual leave a year to go into pre-schools and speak to teachers and see how their children are doing. That amounts to an opportunity for the community to come in to the nursery, making it a two-way relationship.'

Professor Waller is now retired, but says he hopes to see the BRIC project continue. 'Colleagues of mine are looking to secure more funding. We might look to involve older children through primary schools. That will be fine in Sweden, but pressures from SATs in England and literacy and numeracy targets in Italy mean it might be difficult. We may expand instead by having more countries doing the same things. We have had interest from countries including Wales, Ireland, Australia, South Africa and Korea.'

Personally says Professor Waller, 'I started my career as an infant and nursery teacher and then did teacher training, but this is by far the most exciting and interesting thing I have ever done. And now I've retired to spend more time with my grandchildren. There might come a time when they want nothing to do with me, so I need to enjoy this intergenerational link while I can!' ■

MORE INFORMATION

- www.bricproject.org
- The BRIC project guidelines on community engagement are at: www.bricproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/BRIC_guidelines_FINAL.pdf