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*The Little Big Bang Report
2012*

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Contents

The report at a glance

Introducing the Little Big Bang programme	I
1 Little Big Bang in context	18
2 Little Big Bang in practice	22
3 The research	24
4 Little Big Bang in theory	25
5 Little Big Bang key features and strategy	33
6 Some ongoing issues	35
7 Appendix: Little Big Bang Partnership activity	38

Foreword

Little Big Bang (LBB) aimed ‘to push the boundaries of practice, challenge assumptions and arrive at a model of the professional creative practitioner in Children’s Centres.’ This was the shared ambition of the research commissioners Take Art and their project partners, the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, Somerset County Council and Somerset arts organisations (through the Somerset Thrive initiative) and is expressed by Dr Susan Young of the University of Exeter in this report. We were very fortunate to have worked with Dr Young and know that her thoughtful conclusions can inform Early Years policy development at county and national level.

We’d very much like to thank the generosity of our collaborators: the Somerset Arts organisations, the Early Years practitioners at the Children’s Centres, the Lead Creative Practitioners (LCPs) and, most importantly, the children.

Gina Westbrook

Co-Director of Take Art Start and Programme Manager *Little Big Bang*





THE REPORT AT A GLANCE

The *Little Big Bang* programme aimed to increase the quantity and quality of creative experience for young children in Children's Centres in Somerset by developing a model of the creative practitioner in Children's Centres. Children's Centres represent a major, contemporary innovation in provision for very young children and their families with wide-reaching changes to professional roles.

The programme was based on the rationale that the model of how creative practitioners work in Children's Centres needs to develop hand-in-hand with these innovations. If Children's Centres aim to serve the needs of very young children and their families through multi-agency teamwork, then creativity should form part of their offer and early years creative professionals join the team.

Little Big Bang placed three creative practitioners to work in Somerset Children's Centres consistently and continuously across two years. Through action research the role was explored and gradually defined.

This overview summarises the ten core ingredients of the model (section 4 in the report) and the five key features and strategic implications for current policy directions (section 5).

For more about the programme and the activity, see www.takeart.org.

THE TEN CORE INGREDIENTS of the Little Big Bang model



1. Multi-competent creative practitioners

The project placed three creative practitioners to work in Somerset Children's Centres consistently and continuously across two years. Through action research the role was explored and gradually defined. The LCP role is highly skilled and professional. The two-year duration of the programme gave generous time for the LCPs to accumulate experience, develop skills and acquire knowledge.

The LCPs increased their:

- Repertoire of approaches within their own art form
- Repertoire of pedagogical approaches
- Range of multi-modal techniques beyond their own art form
- Knowledge of how to work in a range of contexts with families, children, early years professionals and artists
- Knowledge of how to work across the birth to four age range
- Interpersonal and inter-professional skills for working with a wide range of adults
- Knowledge of the early years and arts sectors and how to design activities to bridge both
- Practical competence and efficiency

Good communication and interpersonal skills were essential. The LCP role required a high level of independent working and leadership skills such as problem solving, being able to innovate, to build relationships and make decisions. The LCPs also needed the ability to design and deliver special events alongside the routine, day-to-day activity with children and families.

Developing work with arts organisations required a set of 'outward facing' skills for consulting, negotiating, planning and designing events. The LCPs developed and strengthened their role as creative catalysts and leaders.



2. *Knowledge of local context*

Two of the LCPs lived in their local communities. Their local knowledge and a commitment to their communities helped them to work effectively with families and with local artists and arts providers. The programme was targeted at communities with families experiencing challenging circumstances and this understanding informed delivery.



3. *Evolution of practice within Children's Centres*

A principle of the LBB programme was that the creative practice should evolve in active partnership with the Children's Centre staff, parents and children. Each LCP and centre could set its own tempo and find its own sense of direction and purpose. Although it was initially more challenging to develop independent ways of working without a ready made plan of action, work that develops from need and purposes set by those involved is more relevant, engaging and effective and likely to be sustained.



4. *Combination of ‘everyday’ practice with occasional ‘high points’*

Working long-term in settings, the LCPs changed their conceptions of practice, developing an approach that was rooted in day-to-day realities and had consistency and longevity. This ‘everydayness’ resulted in work of quality. The LCPs also planned occasional ‘high points’ that created interest and inspiration. These emerged organically from the relationships and ongoing activity that were established within the centres.

“what’s brilliant about what you’re doing is the integrated and sustained delivery” CC Manager



5. *Time heavy, resource light*

The programme prioritised and allowed the time needed to build trust and strong relationships. This aspect is time heavy, but time well spent. With experience, the materials used by the LCPs in work with children became simpler and inexpensive, but had higher creative potential. The impact of the programme on the creative environment in the settings was less in terms of purchased resources and more in terms of how creative activities were incorporated in to the times and spaces of the centre.



6. *Longevity and continuity*

The two year duration of the programme was long enough to create the continuity which had been a project aim and which required a 'shift in gear' to a style of working based on deeper knowledge and long-term relationships. The style of practice was continuous, everyday and embedded.



7. *Shared values and rationale*

The LBB programme shifted between two worlds and their ideologies: the early years sector and arts sector. One of the challenges of inter-professional working for the LCPs was to find a common language, communication systems and terminology that a diversity of professionals could recognise and 'sign up to'.



8. Professional credibility

Creative practitioners need to have a defined, professional identity that can legitimize their work in multi-professional teams and avoid difficulties around issues of expertise, authority and power. Currently there is no national system of professional ratification for the work of creative practitioners in early years. The LCPs gained credibility through the quality of their work, their commitment and achievements. Professional credibility was bolstered internally by the programme seminars.



9 Supportive and vision-sharing management

Overall project management was handled by Take Art and day-to-day management handled by the Children's Centres. The LCPs worked most effectively in those Children's Centres where there was strong leadership and a positive ethos and where key staff were convinced of the value of creativity. Take Art recognised that wider organisational learning in both early years and arts sectors was also important and training opportunities were provided.

"I passionately believe in creativity across the curriculum and I believe in the impact of encouraging children to be creative" CC Manager



10. *Reflective practice*

Monthly team seminars encouraged the LCPs to pause and reflect on their practice. Real and lasting change is achieved through thoughtful analysis of practice and imagining alternative ways of acting. This development of 'thinking professionals' requires strategic support from the agencies that commission and manage creative projects.

The LBB Model of Lead Creative Practitioner in Children's Centres has Five Key Features:

The five key features have wider strategic implications and serve the current policy directions and economic situations of the arts and Early Years sectors.

1. It fosters creative activity that fits the needs and priorities of the centre, its children and families
2. It fosters creativity in young children and families as a foundation for learning and well-being
3. It is consistent and effective
4. It bridges the centre to its locality, its artists and arts providers
5. It represents good value for money



The Lead Creative Practitioners - who's who?

The LCPs worked across Somerset in three 'constellations' loosely centred around Somerset's main market towns of Bridgwater/Shepton Mallet, Yeovil/Crewkerne and Taunton/Langport.

Each LCP worked initially in a different artform:

- Southern: Hannah Lefeuve (movement and dance)
- Central: Richard Tomlinson (digital and visual)
- Northern: Year one Francesca Dunford (theatre) and, in year two, Rod Harris (clay)



Introducing the Little Big Bang programme

The programme aims

The Little Big Bang (LBB) programme aimed to increase the quantity and quality of creative experience for young children in Children's Centres in Somerset and to achieve this by embedding a creative presence in the centres via the LBB practitioners. Being involved in creative activities is deeply enjoyable and rewarding for children. Research suggests that creativity helps to develop important dispositions and abilities. It fosters an orientation to and a foundation for learning and supports social and emotional development¹.

The programme aimed to develop a model of the creative practitioner in Children's Centres. Children's Centres represent a major, contemporary innovation in provision for very young children in this country, with wide-ranging changes to professional roles. The role of the creative practitioner in Children's Centres needs to develop hand-in-hand with these innovations. Existing models of how creative practitioners work in Children's Centres tend to be built on school-based, project-framed models which are not well suited to the new Children's Centres.

In 2008, when the LBB programme was first conceived, the new national network of Children's Centres represented a significant development in the provision of services for young children and families. Children's Centres offer a 'one-stop shop' of multi-professional care and education for *all* young children and were planned to open on a rolling three-year programme. They were one of the most ambitious initiatives of the previous Labour government and were based on sound principles; that quality support in the early years has the potential to make the greatest difference to a child's life chances.

Children's Centres combine different forms and styles of work in one place, often in purpose-built new spaces, delivered by different agencies working in collaboration rather than separately. They address the relationship between the centre and its neighbourhood, and seek to build social, health and economic capacity at the local level². Children's Centres were, therefore, the key places to introduce creative activity for young children and their families and to forge links with arts and cultural venues near by. However, the very different type of provision that Children's Centres aimed to offer presented new challenges and opportunities for the integration of creative activity. The LBB programme aimed to explore how to make the most of the opportunities and how best to meet these challenges.

The programme structure

The LBB programme placed a lead creative practitioner (LCP) to work in Somerset Children's Centres over a continuous period of time; two years. The ideal driving the programme was that every Children's Centre should have a creative practitioner as a permanent and integrated member of staff. Realising the full scope of this aim required more funds than were available, so a more modest, but no less ambitious, plan had to be implemented. The programme recruited three LCPs each covering one area of the county (called a 'constellation') and serving three

¹ www.handsonscotland.co.uk/flourishing_and_wellbeing_in_children_and_young_people/creativity

² Cameron, C. et al. (2009) Working together in extended schools and Children's Centres: a study of inter-professional activity in England and Sweden. London: Department for Children, Schools and Families. (DCSF-RBX-09-10)

children's centres within that area³. The LCPs worked for three days per week to be distributed evenly across the constellation of three Children's Centres. Each of the LCPs also connected with Somerset arts and cultural venues within their designated region⁴, identifying and developing work that bridged the early childhood and cultural sectors.

The programme was planned to be a learning and development project. In order to carry out this process of development in an ongoing and systematic way, the programme was designed as action research. It aimed to question assumptions, explore, understand and develop the role of the LCP. While nationally there has been an abundance of small project initiatives in early years arts, they tend to work with sets of assumptions about the role of artists and creative practitioners in early years practice that go unquestioned. In the meantime there have been important changes in the workforce development of early years practitioners, evolving through the newly formed Children's Centres. These have far-reaching implications for how artists and creative practitioners can and should work in Children's Centres. At the conclusion of the project, the research has arrived at key elements that shift some of the thinking around the professional role of creative arts practitioners in the early years. In this report we present what we have learned.

In recent years there have also been strong moves to encourage arts and cultural venues to work proactively with a wider range of people within their localities. This participatory emphasis coincides with the responsibility placed on Children's Centres to extend their services to children and families within their designated area. Potentially therefore, both sectors are reaching out to their local communities and their efforts could be combined with shared benefits for all. The emphasis on outreach and participatory, community work also has important implications for how the role of early years creative practitioner should evolve.

Since the programme was first conceived in 2008, the Coalition Government introduced budget reductions and changes to policy that have deeply affected both the early childhood and the arts and cultural sectors. In its final year, the programme was operating within this changing landscape. This report both describes the changes and provides interpretations that are realistic and relevant for the world of 2012 and beyond. When resources are scarce, priorities must be clearly established so that resources are allocated wisely. The LBB programme, initiated at a time of optimistic expansion and concluding at a time of uncertain austerity, arrives at priorities and suggestions for practice that are both effective and economically efficient.

Why is this programme important?

The rationale driving the LBB programme was simple. If Children's Centres were to be new, innovative centres that aimed to cater for all the needs of families with young children, then creativity, arts and cultural activity should be part of that offer. To restrict the provision to health, social and early skills-based education such as language and number is to hold a narrow and impoverished view of what constitutes a rich and healthy upbringing⁵. Artistic and creative activity is a fundamental part of daily life, the essence of what makes a community whole, healthy and vibrant. Families and young children need creative activity as much as they need dental care, speech therapy or employment advice⁶.

³ In one area a third children's centre is replaced by a 'rural reach' remit which involves working across isolated rural settings.

⁴ In practice the LCPs are only able to develop connections with those SAP partners in their region that have capacity and interest in developing work, and it may also depend on the artform and nature of projects – it is a two-sided process.

⁵ Ings, R., Crane, N. & Cameron, M. (2012) *Be Creative Be Well Arts, wellbeing and local communities An evaluation*. Arts Council England. www.artscouncil.org.uk

⁶ Adding to the creativity for health and wellbeing rationale, the UNICEF report (2007) indicates that the UK ranks very low in comparison with other European countries in child well-being assessments. The

The contribution of artists and creative practitioners to early childhood provision has expanded and diversified considerably over recent years. Initiatives to encourage creativity for young children and strategies to involve artists in partnerships with early childhood settings have now become part of regular activity for many arts organisations, arts and cultural venues and freelance artist-educators. Yet, in spite of this expansion, there have been no projects which have set out specifically to explore the role of the creative practitioner in Children's Centres in relation to the radical changes they represent⁷.

The role of the artist working in early years settings has taken on many of the characteristics of artists working in schools. The artist in education role has developed over the last ten years culminating in the national programme Creative Partnerships (CP). Although now closed, the CP programme placed artists to work collaboratively with teachers in primary and secondary schools⁸. However, while working in Children's Centres may have some similarities with working in schools it presents distinct opportunities and challenges that need to be recognised and addressed.

Over recent years the nature of early years provision has been changing rapidly with first Sure Start centres and then Children's Centres designed to be 'one stop shops' providing all round services for children and families in one area defined by numbers of children. In cities, the area served by a Children's Centre may be compact, in rural areas such as Somerset, far-reaching. The Children's Centres aim to integrate professionals with different roles and responsibilities to function as an inter-disciplinary, multi-agency service able to respond to the composite needs of families and young children. Their services cater for children from birth upwards and their provision ranges across daycare, drop-in sessions, nursery education and sessions with a specific focus such as parenting skills, library and books or music. Some new professional roles accompany the shift to children's centre – the half-time practitioner with qualified teacher status for example – and existing professional roles are evolving to respond to the new demands of inter-professional integrated provision.

Children's Centres therefore represent a new form of provision staffed by professionals who are in new, expanding and adapting roles. The role of the artist working within these teams also therefore needs to be 'new, expanding and adapting' and able to function within these evolving multi-agency teams.

At the same time arts and cultural providers are increasingly expected to adopt a more participatory approach to their work, designing provision that engages wider 'audiences'⁹. They may employ dedicated education, learning or participation officers¹⁰, but among smaller providers, the luxury of a separate role on sparse funding is often not possible. Particularly in a large rural county such as Somerset, it became clear that the many small and localised arts

current coalition government that has identified happiness and wellbeing as a major policy issue. Arts and cultural activity are associated with improvements in health and well-being.

⁷ After an extensive literature search I feel able to assert this with confidence. The literature review revealed plenty of one-off project reports showcasing the work itself but little learning about the role of artists in early years practice that can be transferred out, beyond the local project.

⁸ Griffiths, M. & Woolf, F. (2004). *Report on Creative Partnerships Nottingham Action Research*. Nottingham: Nottingham Trent University.

⁹ There are many examples of partnership working between arts organisations and early years settings – e.g. Wigmore Hall London, Manchester Museum, Imagine in Edinburgh, London Symphony Orchestra – to name but a few. See recommendations in the report: McMaster, Sir B. (2008). *Supporting Excellence in the Arts: from measurement to judgement*. London: DCMS.

¹⁰ The varying titles of these roles indicates the different emphases put on education/learning or community arts/participation orientations.

providers needed more active support if they were to develop their work with early years settings. One dimension of the role of the lead creative practitioner aimed to provide this support¹¹.

So the rationale driving the LBB programme brought together a number of strategic directions from the arts and culture, education and children's service sectors in Somerset that have both local, regional and national importance.

¹¹ That this is a positive direction for work to develop has been affirmed by Pathfinder initiatives commissioned by Creative, Culture and Education (CCE) and Arts Council England (ACE) in four national regions that found that parents and children were much more likely to participate in activities that were low-key, low-cost, local and accessible than in larger-centre, more elaborate family provision¹¹. Moreover, the Pathfinder study found that arts and cultural providers were unlikely to provide this kind of activity and recommended more 'joined up' provision of the kind being developed by Little Big Bang.

I Little Big Bang in context

However, just as Children's Centres were being established, in some cases in brand new buildings with new staff teams, the Coalition Government announced policy changes that resulted in considerable upheaval. Amidst the current upheaval, it is important to keep a clear view of what is radical and distinctive about Children's Centre provision, particularly in comparison with early childhood settings such as primary schools, nursery and reception classes. It is in these more education-based contexts that most early years arts and creative work has taken place and from which the dominant approaches have evolved. These dominant approaches have become shared and familiar, and through familiarity have become legitimated. But with the changes to early years provision that the Children's Centres represent, the need to rethink is pressing.

A key aspect of Children's Centre provision is that they have a broad remit. Work now is focused not only on individual children but on families as a whole¹², and concerned not only with providing nursery education, but with a wider range of activities such as parenting classes, home visits, drop-in sessions and more. Provision must cater for babies right through to school age children and new Coalition Government policy will offer more places to two-year-olds. To achieve this diversity of activity and the 'wrap-around', multi-agency provision that is now their watchword, Children's Centres bring together a wide range of professionals with varied training backgrounds. Traditionally artists working in early years education have looked to education-derived models of creative practice to inform how they might work and have collaborated with early years nursery staff, most of whom would also have an education orientation. For example, ways of working inspired by the Reggio Emilia nurseries of Northern Italy have offered a child-centred approach to creative practice that has been widely adopted by many early years creative projects as a hallmark of good practice.

However education-derived models of practice, while very valuable, may not be the most flexible and productive in developing practice across the whole range of activity that is now found in Children's Centres. For example, working with a father's group of white working class men or a drop-in session with South Asian mothers needs particular approaches that connect with their outlook, language style, values, priorities, lifestyles and interests. Approaches from community arts or adult education are likely to serve work with parents better than education-derived approaches that are intended for child-focused work with individual or small groups of children. Similarly, a health visitor making home visits to mothers and babies may find therapeutic arts and play approaches or theoretical understandings of non-verbal dance and music communication a valuable addition to her work, and education-derived approaches less relevant.

Children's Centres include daycare provision and sessions for babies and toddlers and these too require specific approaches tailored to this age phase and which can work with the adult-infant pair (or adult and two/three babies as in daycare) who are obviously present in this kind of work. Creative practitioners planning work with these groups cannot fall back on work derived from older children in nursery or reception class settings but need specific knowledge of infant development and play theories and how to work with both children and adults. The expanded remits and repertoire of professional activity in the Children's Centres call for expanded professional 'toolkits': greater knowledge of child development birth to four, particularly in creativity and play, greater repertoire of approaches sourced from not only education but also community and therapeutic arts and greater flexibility in applying these according to situation and need.

¹² The revision to Children's Centre provision by the Coalition Government places more emphasis on support and intervention with families who may benefit most from support.

There is another aspect to reconsider. Early years arts and creative work is usually initiated, funded and designed as 'projects'. Projects bring with them certain structures and sets of expectations. They are typically planned to be short term, with start, continuation and culmination and to be grafted on to the work of the centre. Projects are usually initiated by an external local agency, often an arts organisation. Projects usually have clear aims and objectives for the work itself set out in advance that leave less room for negotiation of aims with the centre staff. Funding is often dependent on aims being explicitly defined and evidence of the aims being met required at the conclusion. Ownership of the project is, therefore usually and somewhat inevitably held by the artists and initiating agency. This is not to imply that project designers are not aware of this imbalance. Many seek to include negotiation, collaboration and ways of ensuring work continues beyond the life of the project in order to increase ownership. However, it is fair to say that projects, being planned in advance, of finite length, self-contained and usually short term tend to be 'delivered' as a ready-made package to Children's Centres, reducing rather than increasing integration and ownership.

In relation to project aims, many projects narrate and legitimate their work according to perceived deficits, either on the part of those who use Children's Centre services or the staff. The perceived 'problems' are often a starting point to justify the arts and creativity work and some form of alleviation of problems identified in the evaluation and taken as an indicator of success. The starting points for the LBB programme deliberately avoided any deficit assumptions. The aims were to create long-term, working relationships with the staff and families so that the lead creative practitioners developed work which recognized and built on assets.

Because the typical project is delivered as a short-term package, the artists/creative practitioners are temporary visitors to the centre. They are seen as a luxury addition, a 'frill', and not as necessary and integral to the working of a Children's Centre. In contrast other Children's Centre staff occupy permanent, salaried positions. Their work is seen as integral and essential to the Children's Centre. Moreover arts and creative people, usually freelancers with a portfolio of varied activity, become used to working as temporary visitors and parachuting in to deliver their work. One of the most significant changes for the LCPs was to experience, recognise and articulate the changes to their practice and professional identity that occurred as they changed from their familiar external role of temporary, project-type worker to long-term, internal centre member.

When the creative practitioner is an internal permanent member of the team and the Children's Centre has ownership of the work, it can be flexibly and consistently integrated according to the priorities and needs of the centre. The result is many small differences in how the role of the creative practitioner operates and how their work is conceptualised. The artist has responsibilities to the Children's Centre and its full range of activity, including many areas that might be considered traditionally off-bounds for a temporary artist such as the many meetings and discussions that make up the fabric of working in a Children's Centre. Exploring, documenting and identifying those differences have been the central tasks of the LBB programme.

A distinct role

If the creative practitioner role in Children's Centres became a reality, then all Children's Centres would employ artists as a matter of course. This may seem a radical idea, but unless such ideas are conceived and argued for, they have no chance of becoming a reality. The role of the artist in early years practice could become recognised as a defined professional role and identity with its own skill and knowledge set – just as, for example, arts therapists are defined. It could be a career path with distinct professional qualifications. The failure to recognise the full range of knowledge and skills required to work successfully in early years arts and to elevate the professionalism of the role with qualifications and systems of accountability is one reason why the quality of practice in early years arts remains persistently low and the work often marginalised.

The Little Big Bang Programme in a Changing Landscape

Midway through the programme the election resulted in the new Coalition Government (in May 2010). This government has made the elimination of the budget deficit its primary economic objective. Furthermore, in order to ensure these financial targets are realised the budget reductions have been front loaded into the first two years of the administration and so the years 2010-12 look set to be the most challenging. At a local level Somerset Children's Centre managers reported budget reductions of 20% for the year 2011-2012.

Changing landscape for early childhood

The belief underlying much new policy development has been that greater power needs to be devolved to local government and indeed to frontline practitioners. The proposition is for less regulation and prescription from central government and a relaxation of the performance management culture. The changes imply that the early years sector will no longer be dominated by large-scale national programmes with prescribed, target driven detailed procedures. Instead we may expect government to set out a framework which local decisions and policy makers, commissioners and managers will be expected to implement, using their own judgement as to what fits local circumstances most appropriately.

These changes begin to suggest that services will be delivered in a very different environment in the coming years. That is, a less prescriptive system which nevertheless will make greater demands in terms of practitioners using their professional judgement. They may be working in very different organisational contexts which will require the capacity to work flexibly and in innovative ways. If this is the case, then the LCP model fits well because the capacity to work independently, creatively and flexibly became central to the model.

This new economic and policy context has a direct impact on Children's Centres. The Coalition Government has stated that it values the contribution they make to child welfare. Nevertheless, it wishes Children's Centres to return to their original focus of working with the most vulnerable. There will be a greater emphasis on working with families, on early intervention from birth and on providing early education for two-year-olds (Allen, July 2011). These shifting emphases are likely to create additional, new demands on the provision of arts and creativity in Children's Centres. They pull the model of early years arts and creative practice required even further away from its origins in education-oriented, school-based practice and validate the aims of the LBB programme to expand the knowledge-base for working with families, parents, babies and under three-year-olds. From an economic perspective, when budgets are tight it is even more important to be alert to changes and design practice that can adapt quickly, effectively and efficiently.

Changing landscape for the arts

The recession and Coalition Government economic policy is also resulting in a period of austerity for the arts sector. There is much discussion in the sector about the implications of this austerity and how best to respond. In a climate of 'doom and gloom' some positive messages are emerging. The huge investment in the arts over the last decade has enabled arts providers to be much more engaged with their audiences and to encourage participation. This is seen as an asset in enabling arts providers to be more innovative and flexible in finding new ways to develop and resource their activity. Broad government policy is to place greater emphasis on the local and community-based. The LBB programme aimed to support Somerset arts organisations in finding new routes to participatory and local arts activity.

Many are calling for the recent financial crisis to be an opportunity to re-think¹³ arts and cultural activity in a fundamental way¹⁴. An article published by NESTA suggests that at times of austerity arts organisations need to continue to take risks, to remodel, to find new ways of working and to be ‘fleet of foot’. Importantly the NESTA article recommends not cutting the mechanisms that support innovation, research and development. The LBB programme prioritized an active process of research and development.

¹³ rethink.missionmodelsmoney.org.uk The Re-think statement: ‘To make the leap to a liveable world, we need to find ways of activating and strengthening the kinds of **values** that will help us create more sustainable ways of living. The re.think programme programme and the resources on this website have been designed to show how engaging with art and culture can help us do this’.

¹⁴ Creative Survival in Hard Times: A new deal of the mind report for Arts Council England, March 2010, B. Gunnell and M. Bright

2 Little Big Bang in practice

Having discussed the context in the last section, we now consider how the programme was planned and carried out in order to achieve its objectives.

Choosing the Creative Practitioners

The positions of creative practitioner were advertised widely¹⁵ and 42 applications were received. Applications were vetted by a selection panel and a shortlist of 6 were invited to interview. Equal opportunities were ensured in a fair and open recruitment process. At interview, applicants were asked to carry out a creative activity with a group of children in a Children's Centre and to give a short presentation at the local theatre and arts centre. The first interviews led to the appointment of two LCPs.

The rigorous and practical interview process was important to be able to evaluate dispositions and qualities that cannot be conveyed in paper-only applications. The creative practitioners needed a range of skills including creative ability, the ability to work with young children, the ability to work in community contexts and good communication skills. Notably the two LCPs appointed initially who remained with the programme throughout its two years (and in one case extended in to a third year), were both graduates who had relevant prior experience extending over many years.

Recruitment to the third constellation proved more difficult and after an initial false start with a job-share team, the post was re-advertised and a third LCP appointed. The third creative practitioner brought energy, talent and good interpersonal skills, but was inexperienced. With mentoring she settled in to the post, but found it demanding and resigned after one year in order to develop her career with a performance company. An experienced practitioner with a known successful track record of early years arts work was recruited to the position for its final months. In this third constellation the people changes disrupted the consistency which proved to be an important ingredient in the role. On the other hand, the recruitment difficulties served to highlight the very specific qualities and attributes which the role required and could be identified in the two long-term LCPs.

Getting started

Both LCPs started during August, the quietest month of Summer and settled in during the first Autumn. There was a period of initial uncertainty and ambiguity that typically characterises the start of any new enterprise, particularly when there was no predetermined role template to follow except the broad aspirations of the project. At this stage there was some tension between the need for certainty and the need to keep an open brief in order to allow the work to evolve in new and innovative ways. As LeFeuvre notes 'as a developing role, LCPs sometimes struggled to articulate and gain understanding of their roles in Children's Centres and venues, especially in outcome-based, hierarchical environments, where roles are clearly defined'¹⁶. First months were devoted to establishing work within the centres, in some centres this was more easily achieved than in others.

¹⁵ The creative survival in hard times report criticizes the fact that jobs in the creative sector are often not advertised and not subject to measures of recruitment that ensure equal opportunities.

¹⁶ LeFeuvre, H. (2012) Little Big Bang Project Evaluation: Unpublished MA document, Canterbury Christchurch University.

Developing work

A considerable range of work was developed over the two years, as listed in the appendix (Appendix A). Once work in the centres was more established, the LCPs started to look outwards to develop links with nearby artists and arts and cultural venues. They found themselves juggling many different strands of work and this remained an unresolved challenge throughout the programme with no simple solution. The LCPs developed their own ways of managing the workload and its different demands, having the freedom to determine their own schedules in consultation with the Children's Centres. As can be seen in the catalogue of work achieved in the LBB project, the LCPs developed many projects alongside the continuity of their work in the centres.

The seminars

A key element of the LBB programme with its action research design was the monthly seminars. The three LCPs, the programme management team and the researcher met to share, reflect, discuss and debate the programme as it progressed.

The seminars were valuable beyond just the research. The LCPs could reflect on current practice and plan next steps. For LCPs working relatively independently they offered peer-to-peer support in response to needs and a chance to share good ideas. They also offered a safe environment in which to openly discuss challenges and an external perspective on any problems. As such the seminars offered a quality improvement model.

The seminars also enabled the LCPS to narrate their own professional values and practices to themselves and to others. This facilitated the development of their professional identity and autonomy and how this might connect with the values and practices in the context of working in the Children's Centres. Thus the seminars offered a means for transformative learning. In the current moves towards inter-professional working, the opportunity for professionals to reflect, to research and to imagine alternatives is taken as central to developing the 'new professional' that inter-agency working requires¹⁷.

¹⁷ Al-Rousi, S. (2011) Interorganizational dynamics and trends: system-wide thinking, In L. Trodd & L. Chivers (Eds.) *Interprofessional Working in Practice: Learning and working together for children and families*

3 The research

'the great thing about LBB is that it hasn't been about tracking and all that stuff, it's been about action research and I've been able to do more because I haven't been constrained'

This next section explains the research, its objectives and method.

Research Objectives

The programme aimed to push the boundaries of practice, challenge assumptions and arrive at a model of the professional creative practitioner in Children's Centres. To achieve this aim, the programme was designed around the principles of action research. In action research exploring issues and identifying learning takes place internally and continuously. This process contrasts with classic evaluation where the process is external and delivered as a set of final insights. Action research does not arrive at formal 'findings'. Its relevance rests on how it explores the issues that underlie practice, arrives at new learning and sets out suggestions for future practice. Given the many changes that occurred during the life of the project, it was particularly advantageous that the action research model is responsive to change.

Sources of Data

The sources of data were:

- Notes from the seminar meetings
- Interviews at beginning, mid-term and conclusion of the programme with Children's Centre managers and other key members of staff
- Programme documentation
- Observations notes from visits to Children's Centres

The data was analysed qualitatively via a process of constant review and comparison in which major themes start to emerge from the data.

This report complements the regular reporting to the Local Education Authority in which more detailed evidence of numbers of children, activities and evaluation was provided. Simply counting numbers of attendees and workshops and reporting positive comments tells the 'what' of a project, but tells nothing about the 'how'. This report focuses on qualitative analysis of the process that is intended to provide learning that can be useful beyond the project itself. It follows Pawson and Tilley's view that social projects should be viewed 'internally' as they are 'always embedded in a range of attitudinal, individual, institutional, and societal processes'¹⁸ Because projects work differently in different contexts, project models cannot simply be replicated from one context to another and automatically achieve the same outcomes. Learning about the 'how' can, however, be distilled in to sets of core elements and key ingredients. These are then transferrable to other contexts to inform future work.

¹⁸ Pawson, R. and Tilley, N. (1997) *Realistic Evaluation* Sage, p. 216

4 Little Big Bang in theory

Little Big Bang was an ambitious, long-term programme that was shaped by the Centres and their staff, by the children and families, by the Somerset arts organisations and by the individual creative practitioners, with their own sets of values, experiences and practices. From a process of analysing all the programme documentation and from interviews with key people carried out at start, mid-point and conclusion of the project, **Core Ingredients** were distilled. Two of the LCPs remained in post throughout the project, the third constellation experienced some changes of staffing. It is therefore primarily the experiences of the two long-term LCPs that feed in to this next section.

The Ten Core Ingredients

The core ingredients are first listed and then explained in detail.

1. Multi-competent creative practitioners
2. Knowledge of local context
3. Evolution of practice within Children's Centres
4. Combination of 'everyday' practice with occasional 'high points'
5. Time heavy, resource light
6. Longevity and continuity
7. Shared values and rationale
8. Professional credibility
9. Supportive and vision-sharing management
10. Reflective practice

I Multi-competent creative practitioners

It soon became clear that working successfully as a creative practitioner in contemporary Children's Centres is no longer just about being an expert in one creative field. The LCPs needed to become very competent in a range of professional skills beyond their art form of initial training. The two-year duration of the programme gave generous time for the LCPs to accumulate experience, develop skills and acquire knowledge. Short-term projects, in contrast, do not allow enough time for this depth of professional development. The experience, skills and knowledge are listed as follows:

- Increased repertoire of approaches *within* their own art form
- Increased range of approaches *beyond* their own art form, particularly introducing multi-modal approaches
- Increased repertoire of pedagogical approaches ranging from adult-led to child-centred, process-led to product led and knowledge of how to tailor approach to situation
- Increased knowledge of how to work in a range of contexts (daycare, mother and baby groups, parent and child groups, nursery) with families, children, early years professionals and artists and to integrate their work
- Increased knowledge of how to work across the birth to four age range [with babies, toddlers as well as 3-4 year-olds]
- Increased interpersonal and inter-professional skills for working with a wide range of adults
- Deeper knowledge of the early years sector and the arts sector and how to develop activity that bridged both sectors
- Increased practice-competence and greater efficiency

Working in arts and creative activity in Children's Centres with families and young children is a highly skilled, professional activity. It is notable that all the LCPs possessed an initial degree in an art form plus additional experience and specialist training. Good communication and interpersonal skills proved essential, particularly to work with parents and carers. The work with children required knowledge of children's creative development from birth to four and a repertoire of approaches that could be applied in a range of contexts. The LCP role required a high level of independent working and leadership skills such as problem solving, being able to innovate, to build relationships and make decisions. The LCPs also needed the ability to design and deliver special activities and events alongside the routine, day-to-day activity with children and families.

The best work seemed to combine specialist arts expertise together with expertise in community and early childhood creative activity. The idea of a 'hybrid' arts professional or an 'arts social pedagogue' with a mix of experience, knowledge and approaches becomes a realistic proposition. The social pedagogue role is found in Denmark specifically and other parts of Scandinavia. It is based on a fundamentally holistic concept in which the well-being of the whole child is the focus of work that combines elements of teaching, social work, counseling, playwork and child-care. Arguably the UK response to this concept is the 'early years professional' and in the arts, the community musician or artist. However, community artists in similar roles place themselves outside of traditional education and narrate their role and work in distinct contrast to what they see as the impoverished approaches of educators. This narrowing can restrict the skills-base available to them and tends to result in an unhelpful 'them and us' approach¹⁹. The LCP model sought to integrate the artist to avoid any unhelpful contrasts and to encourage the development of 'hybrid' approaches.

Nonetheless this expansion of professional arts expertise can be threatening to professional identity, particularly if it is seen as a dilution of specialist expertise. The blurring of roles might have eroded the LCPs sense of making a unique professional contribution. Certainly for the LCPs to maintain their deep specialist knowledge and hold on to artist identities while constructing a new 'multi-agency identity' was sometimes difficult. For one LCP who had less background experience to draw on the hybrid role proved to be very challenging. During the seminars identity dilemmas about how the LCPs saw themselves and how others viewed were sometimes an undercurrent in discussions.

There are a number of important implications to draw out of this finding from the action research that could influence wider policy decisions. Firstly, the identification of competences and then the professional development needs of early years creative practitioners working in networked and fluid environments should be given more attention. Secondly, there is currently no requirement for artists working in early years settings to be qualified, even to a minimal standard. A system of accreditation and accountability will help to drive up standards and raise professional credibility. In 2006 the Roberts Report²⁰ recommended establishing a best practice recognition scheme for creativity in Early Years settings with associated workforce development for education and creative practitioners. Finally, the LBB programme highlights the inadequate infrastructure in the UK for the development of people to fit the roles that are currently

¹⁹ Graham Jeffery discusses this issue, particularly the 'them and us' positioning that can result in artist/teacher partnerships in his book, *The Creative College: Building a Successful Learning Culture in the Arts*, in which he discusses the TAPP project which placed explored the working relationships between artists and teachers in schools.

²⁰ Roberts, P. (2006) *Nurturing Creativity in Young People A report to Government to inform future policy* Department for Culture Media and Sport, DCMS

emerging²¹. In this respect the arts and cultural sector could look to the early years sector where training for multi-agency leadership, for outreach work with families, for care and education of young children is now provided in response to Children's Centre structure.

It became increasingly clear during the programme that the LCPs needed a range of key dispositions and the following set of attributes were identified by the Children's Centre managers and key members of staff.

- Resilience and resourcefulness
- Empathy and responsiveness
- Flexibility
- The ability to think creatively
- Commitment and loyalty
- Humility
- Energy and motivation
- Confidence in the value of creativity

'R. is versatile and adaptive to staff and they are so different in different settings'

While this list of dispositions may be the wish list for any professional role, they are qualities that are particular pertinent for roles where a high degree of collaboration with others, either as parents, children or professionals is required. The qualities are fostered and enhanced by good management which, in turn, displays the same dispositions so that they become part both of the programme and Children's Centre ethos.

2 Knowledge of local context

All of the LCPs lived in Somerset or close by in Bristol, and two of them lived within the immediate locality of their Children's Centres. A close knowledge and a sense of belonging to the local community emerged as important in enabling the LCPs to work effectively with families and with local artists and arts providers. The two artists who lived locally had personal knowledge that reduced the need for research and consultation, particularly in relation to working with local artists and arts providers. This also increased the LCPs commitment to their cluster centres and community and helped to guard against the well-known problem of artists parachuting in. An unanticipated outcome has been that closer and more lasting relationships have been formed between the LCPs and their Centres and community which may then continue beyond the life of the programme.

The current emphasis of the Coalition Government on local as opposed to national service responsiveness spotlights the positive existing contribution and potential future role of local arts provision linked with Children's Centres.

In spite of local knowledge, the LCPs still found that they needed to spend considerable time and effort to develop links with local arts providers. This required a different set of 'outward facing' skills for consulting, negotiating, planning and the design of events within the larger programme structure. Each agency has its own agenda and often its own language in which it expresses its vision and practice and the LCPs had to find ways of linking in with these to suggest combined activities. Later in the programme these demands were recognized by the Take Art manager and some of this negotiation was undertaken on behalf of the LCPs.

The benefits of this experience are that the LCPs have developed and strengthened their role as creative catalysts and leaders, with abilities to function both within and across artistic institutions

²¹ Creative Survival in Hard Times: A new deal of the mind report for Arts Council England, March 2010, B. Gunnell and M. Bright. This report identifies the 'basic lack of knowledge of the skills needed and the scarcity of occupational pathways' (p. 13)

and social/educational institutions. The challenges of acting as bridging agents highlighted here provide important learning for arts organisations (see also strategic implications at the end of this report.)

3 Practice that evolves with the Children's Centres

Each Children's Centre involved in the LBB programme was distinct. The variety in the organisation of the Children's Centres and the services they offered was very wide. The centres were faithful to the defined 'core offer'²², but their origins, whether in education and care, health or social care, often had a direct influence on each centre's ethos, strengths and emphasis.

One important principle of the LBB programme was that the creative practice should evolve in active partnership with the Children's Centre staff, parents and children. This contrasts with many short-term arts and cultural projects which deliver pre-designed models of practice and position the Children's Centre staff, parents and children as passive recipients. Pre-designed models are often designed to compensate for assumed deficits or problems. LBB practice was closely tailored to the centres' needs and priorities. This required resourcefulness and flexibility on the part of the LCPs and knowledge of a wide repertoire of approaches that they could apply according to context and need. In this way each LCP and centre could set its own tempo and find its own sense of direction and purpose. Although it was initially more challenging to develop independent ways of working without a ready made plan of action, work that develops from needs, purposes and strengths of those involved is more relevant, engaging, effective and efficient and likely to be sustained.

The LCPs continually strove to combine good artistic practice with practice that engaged with the range of community and participatory activities offered by the Children's Centres. The skills of integrating creative work and artistry required a balancing act. The LCPs found that there was a need to continually challenge the notion that work for young children cannot be good art or that children's playful imaginative process cannot be art-full and worthwhile. By planning special events that grew organically from their work in the centres, the LCPs could initiate these debates, if not directly, at least through example. These debates need to be continued and creative practitioners with substantial experience given the opportunity to share their knowledge and experience through mentoring schemes and other dissemination opportunities. These were also added in to the programme in its second year and beyond.

4 Combination of 'everyday' practice with occasional 'high points'

'what's brilliant about what you're doing is the integrated and sustained delivery' (CC manager)

The two long-term LCPs arrived at similar conclusions about the development of their work across the duration of the project. They described important changes in conception, one describing his practice as becoming 'less precious' and the other as no longer having the 'same sense of big or over-ambitious'. Both framed their outlook and approach as increasingly rooted in the day-to-day realities of the settings in which they were working and increasingly child- and parent-centred. One LCP described moving on from what she saw now (with the benefit of hindsight and with considerable honesty) as a naïve approach, looking in the early days of the programme for an instant 'wow' effect. She came to recognise, as her confidence grew, that a more 'solid, dense, yet understated approach' offers more quality to the children's experiences and learning. Both LCPs referred to being grounded, rooted in realities and were in agreement that quality work emerges from this everydayness and its consistency and continuity. From the

²² The core offer for Children's Centres is to be found in the Sure Start Children's Centres planning and performance management guidance issued by the Department for Children, Schools and Families in November 2006 (Annex – page 24). See also Sure Start Children's Centres: Phase 3 planning and delivery, DCSF, 2007.

perspective of managers and staff in the CC, the LCPs' practice developed to become more integrated and as such it was 'consistent and sustained'. One manager emphasized the fact that this consistency and integration resulted in more impact than short-term, high visibility projects of which she had had much experience.

Both LCPs reported that the programme had given them a quantity of substantial, practical experience with the result that their work became increasingly efficient. Their planning and preparation became much quicker at the same time as their work became richer. Thus the long-term placing of creative practitioners leads to work that is both more effective and more efficient.

The Children's Centre staff most appreciated the consistency, continuity and integration of LBB creative practice in to the everyday running of the centre. This kind of practice is, however, low visibility. The programme also realized that there is a place and value for high visibility events and displays. The LCPs combined both dimensions and created occasional 'high points'. The team learnt that if work is only of the everyday and blended type, there may not be the high points that create interest and inspiration. The LCPs achieved a good balance and at its best the 'everyday' work, its relationships and qualities, its processes, would be brought in to a final product in the form of a display or event. Thus one embodied the other. In seminars the team discussed how the product could be an intrinsic part of the creative process bringing a sense of completeness. Most importantly, however, the products emerged from the relationships and work that were established within the centres in an organic way; not pre-planned.

5 Time heavy, resource light

The programme recognised that time needs to be invested to build trust and strong relationships and it allowed for that time. The LCPs were able to bridge what has been called the 'approachability gap' in working with parents. So, for example, time spent eating bacon sandwiches with a Dad's group reaped long-term benefits in terms of relationships and built the trust to support fathers in taking part. Yet artists in short-term projects rarely have either the opportunity or feel justified in taking time to forge relationships when delivery and outcomes are the priority.

As the programme progressed and the LCPs gained in experience, the actual resources they used with the children became simpler, portable and inexpensive²³. Yet these simpler materials had greater potential for creative play. One LCP travelled with large boxes of scrap store materials in the boot of his car that could be used in a multitude of ways. Another LCP kept minimal materials in her pockets – a square of hessian or some long, silky coloured ribbons. The audit of the creative environment that was undertaken at the start and conclusion of the programme revealed no significant changes in resourcing for arts and creativity over the duration of the programme in those centres that remained with the programme across the full two years. Only part of this can be accounted for by the provision of resources from the LBB project. It can be partly explained by the budget cuts affecting the second year, when all spending was reduced.

It may also, of course, suggest that the programme had no influence on the provision for creative practice in the settings. Taking a close look at the audit reveals something else. The environment was, however, significantly changed in four settings by changes to the way space was used, how equipment was stored, displayed and how space was used to provide for creative activity. Therefore the impact on the creative environment was less in terms of purchased resources but more in terms of how the accommodation was used and how creative activities were incorporated in to the times and spaces of the centre.

²³ The digital artist clearly used his own technology equipment which was costly.

6 Longevity and continuity

The ideal driving the programme was for a creative practitioner to be a key member of Children's Centre staff teams on a permanent basis. The reality of funding limited the placement of LCPs in Children's Centres to two years. However this was a long enough period to allow for the continuity which had been a key programme aim and for exploration of the rewards, issues and challenges that accompany a long-term integration in to the Centre teams. From the artists' point of view, they arrived with experience of short-term projects that deliver activities for which, very often, time and money are tight and quick results expected. The shift in gear to a programme that ran across two years without short-term expectations took some getting used to. With time, patterns of working settled in to a style of working that was based on long-term integration. Mention has already been made of the evolution of practice with the centres that was continuous, everyday and embedded and the advantages of this style of working.

7 Shared values and rationale

There was a need to find a rationale for the programme in a common language, driven by shared principles and values that a diversity of professionals could recognise and 'sign up to'. The LBB programme shifted between two primary cultures and their ideologies; the arts world and the early years institutional world, and the LCPs were translating between the two. In some instances they could find this common ground, as, for example, with a local artist who had a particular affinity for working with young children and opened her studio for a visit or with a Children's Centre teacher who had particular knowledge and enthusiasm for the Reggio Emilia approach. In other instances the LCPs had difficulty finding common ground on which to explain their work, develop practice in the Children's Centre or develop links with artists and arts venues.

Even the term 'creative practitioner' proved to be problematic. It was originally adopted both to emphasise creativity, to embrace all art forms and to avoid the term 'artist' which can carry elitist overtones. It was then altered to 'lead creative practitioner' to avoid the implication that early years staff are not also creative. The addition of 'lead' then implied a leadership role which the LCPs found confusing.

What these various dilemmas demonstrate is that discourses, terms and titles are not neutral but carry implications for roles and professional relationships and are underpinned by deeper ideologies and conceptions. One of the challenges of inter-professional working in Children's Centres is to find common language, communication systems and the right terms and also to establish a clear understanding of roles and contributions. This always takes time, but is time well spent. The challenges of bringing together very different discourses and approaches should never be underestimated or glossed over.

8 Professional credibility

The need for the role of creative practitioners to have a defined, professional identity has already been raised. With professional identity comes professional credibility that can legitimate the creative practitioners' work. This core ingredient of the role was highlighted more by its absence in the first year of the programme and some of the struggles the LCPs experienced in establishing their work. It was less apparent in the second year as the LCPs gained credibility through the quality of their work, their commitment and achievements. Professional credibility will be, in the long run, more determined by external structures such as professional qualification pathways.

Where some difficulties in relationships arose between the LCPs and staff in the Children's Centre these were likely to centre around issues of identity, expertise and power. Power was often expressed through early years practitioners' language and terminology conveyed through particular discourses relating to certain areas of practice. Systems of regulation were often

present but invisible in Children's Centre practice until unwittingly contravened by the LCPs. Rules for health and safety, for 'ways of doing things' in practice with children, for confidentiality could be rigidly applied by those professionals for whom the rules had special currency. Jeffery (2005) outlines some mythologies that may shape what he calls 'the territories' occupied by educators/early years staff and artists/creative practitioners. From analysis of the seminar notes in line with Jeffery's 'generative metaphors' similar themes were to be found in this project:

- The creative freedom and imagination of the artist are in tension with the forms of control and regulation that children's centres are subject to and/or impose
- Risk and safety issues are rigidly imposed in children's centres and risk, messiness is intrinsic to creative activity
- Early years settings are dominated by systems and schedules that diminish rather than extend imaginative play with children

With time and experience, understanding, confidence and trust between CC staff and the LCPs, these 'territories' tended to disappear. It was noticeable that they were expressed by the LCPs who worked for shorter durations in the centres²⁴.

Occasionally the LCPs felt their own approaches, ideas and values in relation to practice with the children were thought to be less important and were overlooked in favour of the 'authoritative' forms of expertise that prevailed. These issues were aired in seminars, usually in relation to specific incidents and often accompanied by feelings of frustration. The seminars could serve to bolster professional identity and affirm credibility. However, without collective discussion involving the full Children's Centre staff teams to negotiate values and visions, the LCPs often had little choice but to conform or to adapt. It also suggests that the LCPs never quite became fully 'signed up' members of the Children's Centre staff teams, in spite of the aims driving the project, and therefore able to negotiate their roles on an equal footing. This was partly due to the one-day-per week visits, but partly also due to the fact that Children's Centre staff and managers had not, in all cases, shifted their conceptions of the professional Creative Practitioner role.

9 Supportive and vision-sharing management

'I passionately believe in creativity across the curriculum and I believe in the impact of encouraging children to be creative' (CC manager)

The management of the LBB programme was two-sided. Overall programme management was handled by Take Art and day-to-day management handled by the Children's Centres. This sometimes placed the LCPs between two different organizational structures, cultures and agendas which they then had to negotiate. Recent writing on inter-professional and partnership working, particularly in relation to Children's Centres, identifies shared purposes and common goals as important factors.²⁵

For Take Art the roles and responsibilities of leadership in this experimental creative programme were complex and challenging. The programme was time-consuming and at times stressful to manage, particularly during a period of budgetary and policy change in the arts and early years. The Take Art manager needed to maintain an overview and strategic leadership while also retaining an optimistic vision at a time of considerable change and reduction²⁶.

²⁴ Jeffery, G. (ed.) (2005) *The creative college: building a successful learning culture in the arts*, Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books

²⁵ Rose, J. (2011) Dilemmas of Inter-Professional Collaboration: Can they be Resolved? *Children and Society* 25(2) 151-163.

²⁶ Sue Hoyle of the Clore Leadership Programme Programme says that what is needed is really good leaders in the arts – clear sense of purpose, who can build relationships, can innovate, solve problems and make choices –

The LCPs could work most effectively in those Children's Centres where there was strong leadership and a positive ethos. The head of centre played a crucial leadership role, facilitating collaboration and setting the ethos of the centre. The most effective heads of centres were particularly good at promoting teamwork and empowering staff. It is well recognized in EY practice that the quality of leadership is key in ensuring quality of provision and practice, and certainly this was born out in the LBB project. In those centres where the manager was convinced of the value of creative practice and provided active support, the LCPs flourished in a climate of positive appreciation and support. One change to the centres where an LCP was placed was made for the reason of seeking out a more supportive managerial environment. The learning here is that centre managers need to also share the vision of creativity and its benefits.

The individual learning of the LCPs could not be separated therefore from the organisational and management learning of the many different organisations within which their work was nested – Take Art, the three Children's Centres and the Somerset arts and cultural venues with their location. The programme focused on the learning of the individual LCPs but soon recognized that wider organizational learning was also important and diverted some effort to setting up training opportunities.

10 Reflective practice

The monthly seminars which were a core part of the programme structure and fulfilled its action research dimension, encouraged the development of reflective practice among the programme team. Benefits of the opportunity to reflect beyond just the research dimension have already been explained earlier in the report. However, reflective practice should be integral to all professional roles, not just at the research and development stage. In a professional context where so much emphasis is placed on delivery, outcomes and the creative activity itself, seminars and reflective practice are important because they recognise that change requires new professional ways of acting and being, rather than just skills and knowledge.

The learning and development of practice requires strategic support from the agencies who commission and manage early years creative practice. Take Art is committed to supporting the professional development of the artists it employs on community and education projects. Two of the LCPs are going on to pursue higher degrees that will build on their early years and creativity/arts experience accumulated during the LBB project. The programme has thus successfully created two 'thinking professionals' and has acted as a catalyst for advancing professional development.

The inclusion of seminars does not necessarily ensure reflective thinking happens. Initially the LCPs found the monthly seminars lacked structure. To one LCP the open-ended nature of action research; the sense that 'we were making it up as we went along' created uncertainty at first. A simple reporting procedure was introduced and helped to provide more structure. In addition, the seminars sometimes had to fulfill a dual purpose as management meetings and there was not always a clear delineation between administration, management and research/development. The analysis and theorizing of practice that is part of reflective practice can remain in tension with the apparently more pressing practical concerns.

5 Little Big Bang: Key features and strategic implications

The LBB programme demonstrated that LCPs could develop approaches to creative practice that were tailored to meet the needs of the Centre, its children and families, within a local community of artists and arts providers. By working long-term in the centres, the LCPs developed practice that had a range of positive features associated with continuity and integration. In short, they successfully increased the quantity and quality of creative experience for young children and families in the centres where they worked; a key aim of the project. Through their work we have been able to analyse and identify the core ingredients of the model for others who plan future work. The important strategic implications of this model for those in arts and education organisations who commission and design work in creative, arts and cultural activity for very young children in Children's Centres and their families are clear.

Now we list the key features of the model and how they link with current policy and strategies.

Five Key Features of the Model

The LBB model of Lead Creative Practitioner in Children's Centres has the following five key features:

1. It fosters creative activity that fits the needs and priorities of the centre, its children and families
2. It fosters creativity in young children and families as a foundation for learning and well-being
3. It is consistent and effective
4. It bridges the centre to its locality, its artists and arts providers
5. It represents good value for money

Arriving at a model of the Creative Practitioner role in Children's Centres and identifying the key ingredients needed for the model is the important learning from this project. This learning can inform future commissioning and investment, so that money is spent wisely and effectively. In many respects, the programme fits with the current coalition government's emphasis on localism and budget constraint.

The revised version of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum shifts creative development from a central focus, although it nonetheless remains a component of effective learning and teaching. The LBB model of creative practitioner promotes the principle of a professional role that can work in an integrated way to promote creative learning and teaching within Children's Centres and support the introduction of the revised EYFS.

The Coalition government calls for Children's Centres to return to their original remit of serving the most vulnerable and to focus their efforts even more on supporting parents with babies and two-year-olds. The LBB model emphasized the need to expand the professional knowledge base to include these dimensions and is therefore well suited to the policy changes in early years provision.

The Nutbrown Review of early education and childcare qualifications interim report (March, 2012) has highlighted the patchy and poor qualification structures for early years work and the lack of professional pathways. It validates the recruitment of LCPs who were graduates and

endorses many of the points raised in this report regarding a defined early years professional role with recognition of the expertise required.

The LBB programme and the model of creative practitioner it promotes should be seen as a key contribution to Arts Council England's core mission of 'achieving great art for everyone', enabling more people to experience and be inspired by the arts. The principle of fostering links between arts organisations and community settings is also part of Arts Council England's future activity. However, as the LBB programme demonstrated, the arts sector needs much support in developing work with the early years sector and recognising the value and opportunities it represents. The role of LCPs to act as brokers between Children's Centres and arts organisations serves Arts Council England's strategic framework to improve the 'delivery of arts opportunities for children'²⁷ and anticipates the proposed funding by ACE of bridging organisations which will work to connect the arts and education sectors. It is important, however, to point out a serious discrepancy; that the strategic framework does not mention early childhood, families or the early years sector, but focuses on school-based activity and school-age children.

²⁷ Arts Council England (ACE) (2012) *Achieving Great Art for Everyone: A strategic framework for the arts*. Document retrievable from www.artscouncil.org.uk

6 Some ongoing issues

No programme is plain sailing and many of the challenges have been mentioned throughout the project. In this final section some ongoing issues are discussed briefly that are part of the wider structural and organizational context within which any creative and arts programme in the early years is working. As such, presenting them here is part of the ongoing learning that was a core aim of the LBB project. The programme brought together a number of different partners and as in all partnership working they have differing agendas, priorities, policies and ideologies underpinning their work.

Children's Centres

Each of the Children's Centres had concerns and tensions that strongly influenced how they engaged with the project. Some of these were unique to the Children's Centre and some were a consequence of county-wide and national changes. Effective leadership within the Children's Centres was often key in enabling the LCP to work within existing structures, but in some cases, even effective leadership could not overcome internal divisions and tensions. Sometimes Children's Centre managers hoped that the LCP could act as a neutral change agent and assist them in alleviating these internal divisions; but this was rarely possible. The LCPs work could develop creative practice but not be the magic solution to internal personnel issues.

Children's Centres' existing practice

The aim of the programme was not to introduce a specific approach to creativity, but to find ways to connect with existing Children's Centre practice and build on it. This made more demands on the LCP than implementing a ready-made package and required them to be resourceful and knowledgeable. However this approach ultimately has more likelihood of being sustained if it emerges and blends with existing practice, personalities and structures within the CC and is not imported.

Particularly in the early stages of the work children's centre staff would ask the LCPs to provide activities, for example a dance for a Christmas show, or family photos, that were not in keeping with the LCPs' vision of creative activity with children and families. Initially however they often conformed to these requests for the benefits of allowing the centres to set the agenda and forging relationships. Later in the project, once established, they could take a stronger lead in designing activities based on their own visions and values.

It had not been an aim of the LBB programme to work specifically with the practitioners in settings nor to offer training. The rationale was clear. A creative practitioner should be employed as a permanent member of the team to take responsibility for that area of provision. Just as a language specialist will support language development or a health visitor checks on physical development, so a creative specialist will focus on that area of development. However, if it fitted the CC remit to offer some form of training to staff, the LCPs provided this, but it was not predetermined within the programme plans.

The rationale was clear and was articulated to children's centre managers, yet they still in many cases carried the traditional model of short-term projects in their expectations of the LCP role. As such, they would sometimes express disappointment at the lack of influence on the practice of their current staff. To a large extent the ability of the LCP to affect practice rested on deeper structural aspects within the Children's Centre over which they had no influence such as time, commitment and internal professional relationships among staff in a setting. However, the low level of initial training and minimal qualifications among early years practitioners and more seriously, the lack of incentive and motivation to develop their practice is an ongoing, entrenched problem that is well recognised in the field as a whole and is being addressed on a higher policy and structural level.

While some of these issues and the tensions they raised sometimes complicated or frustrated the work of the LCPs, they are part of the reality of early years working caused by the historical fragmentation of services and the different training and qualification structures of staff. The LCPs now have a deep understanding of the early years context and the challenges that it presents.

Somerset arts providers

'I would say with Somerset Film, it was the right time, right person'

The programme brought together a number of diverse aims and the LCPs found it challenging to serve all of these aims. The element of the programme which required the LCPs to connect with arts organisations within their locality remained the more difficult strand throughout. The LCPs tried a number of different approaches for connecting and stimulating work with arts organisations but unless there was a receptive person at the organisation, attempts usually floundered. In some cases LCPs experienced frustration and disappointment at the lack of interest shown by some arts and cultural organisations. Where individual staff members had the time, energy and vision to do so, such as at the Octagon in Yeovil, the Brewhouse in Taunton, Somerset Film, Somerset Art Works, partnered activities would flourish. Redundancies, changes and gaps in staff recruitment also hampered the LCPs ability to develop bridging activity. For example two experienced staff in Somerset theatres who developed their knowledge of the early years sector via a previous Take Art project were made redundant. However, there were many positive outcomes. In Yeovil for example, the staff member who has been most active now has established contact with local children's centres, knows how to programme for early years and to plan the 'front of house' requirements. He has competences and understanding to continue working in this way independently of the LCP.

Local Authority

Although the LCPs did not communicate directly with the local authority, the Take Art project manager had this responsibility. Constant restructuring of local authority roles meant that it was sometimes difficult finding the right person to talk to. Local authority personnel are used to solving problems by delivering services, but generally this is within the confines of what local or central policy dictates. As such, local authorities are carefully organised to deliver set services at scale and to certain standards. Effort and skills are diverted away from innovation and creativity towards compliance to set procedures²⁸. The budget cutting and pruning of services in the second year of the programme also affected the local authority personnel.

Arts agency

As a self-funding organisation Take Art expected to incorporate marketing, branding and other promotional approaches in to the programme structure. This business-style approach did not always sit well with local government, educational and social cultures of Children's Centres and some tensions between the differing agendas were experienced. The model of the arts organisation as an independent business unit may also need to adapt to more networked and fluid environments and to explore the challenges presented by multi-agency working just as Children's Centres are doing.

²⁸ GoddardPayne and Temperley Research (2011) Transforming Early Years: different, better, lower cost services for children and their families Learning Partner's Final Report on the Transforming Early Years Programme Programme January 2010 – July 2011 www.innovationunit.org

University

This programme included a partnership with a university via the work of a university-based academic. As is often the case in projects which are not research led but where the research as an interwoven component as in action research, there was an imbalance between practical, descriptive, problem solving and management issues and the development of foundational knowledge and theory. This is a dilemma often encountered in projects that are run on action research principles and this was a programme that was juggling many different agendas. A more proactive seminar approach might have allowed for more structured input and output.

Appendix: Little Big Bang Partnership activity

Part of the programme consisted of creating new projects. Some of these are documented in these cards and the following table summarises the full range of activity:

Project details	Art form	Constellation	LBB lead artist	Collaborative Artists	Children's Centre	Somerset Arts Organisation
Summer story sessions through movement and visual explor- Bear Hunt and Hungry Caterpillar. Butterfly collage		Southern	Hannah Lefeuve	Jenni Dutton - natural materials and visual art	Yeovil Reckleford	n/a
Heather and Jo visited Reckleford half-term sessions, collaborating with Hannah to plan sessions for parents and children	Forest school, Music and Movement	Southern	Hannah Lefeuve	Heather Brown and Jo Harvey	Yeovil Reckleford	n/a
Heather visited two different Stay and Play sessions for two weeks, collaborating with Hannah to enhance the offer	Forest school, with movement and the imagination	Southern	Hannah Lefeuve	Heather Brown	Yeovil Oaklands	n/a
Pre-show foyer activities for Little Red Hen, Thomas the Tank (12/02/11), Gruffalo's Child (02/07/11), Mr Men (23/10/11), Big Box of Banannas (26/10/11)	Movement and the imagination	Southern	Hannah Lefeuve	Visiting theatre companies	Yeovil Reckleford and Oaklands	Octagon Theatre, Yeovil
Weekly dance classes for grandparents and toddlers, offered at a heavily subsidised rate	Movement and the imagination	Southern	Hannah Lefeuve	n/a	n/a	Octagon Theatre, Yeovil
Weekly dance classes for parents and toddlers, offered at a heavily subsidised rate	Movement and the imagination	Southern	Hannah Lefeuve	Musician (once). Rachelle Green covered some sessions	n/a	David Hall, South Petherton
Corina visited Reckleford Nursery (07/04/11) and Oakland's Stay and Play (08/04/11) as a prelude to her contribution to the Bigger Bang conference	Drama, movement and music	Southern	Hannah Lefeuve	Corina Chiran	Yeovil Reckleford and Oaklands	n/a
Beach project	Visual Art	Central	Richard Tomlinson			Brewhouse Theatre, Taunton
Cubes project	Visual Art	Central	Richard Tomlinson	Viv Gordon		Brewhouse Theatre, Taunton
		Northern	Richard Tomlinson			Shepton Mallet Digital Arts festival
Rachelle delivered three one-off sessions, as part of the Associates project, at Broadway outreach Stay and Play sessions	Dance and movement	Southern	Hannah Lefeuve	Rachelle Green	Ilminster children's centre	n/a
	Music and Movement	Central	Richard Tomlinson	Viv Gordon	The Holly's CC, Taunton	Tacchi Morris, Taunton
		Central?	Richard Tomlinson	Jenni Dutton, Hannah Lefeuve	Little Vikings, Watchet	Regal Theatre, Minehead
		Northern	Rod Harris		CC in Frome	Merlin Theatre, Frome
One day conference - 'Play into Play' explored creating work for early years	Mainly performing arts	Northern	All LBB artists	La Baracca,	??	Bridgwater Arts Centre
One day conference - 'Inside, Outside' forest school and arts activity for early years	Forest school	Central?	All LBB artists	Heather Brown, Hannah Aitken, Rachelle Green, Jenni Dutton	The Levels, Langport hosted it	n/a
		Southern?	All LBB artists	Rachelle Green, Jo Harvey, Corina Chiran,		



For more information about
Take Art and the *Little Big Bang* project
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Little Big Bang was led and managed by Take Art, supported by Somerset Arts Promoters and funded by Arts Council England, Somerset County Council, the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. Photo credits to Richard Tomlinson & Ingrid Hesling