



Big Wide Talk response to *Creating the Picture*, Primary National Strategy, June 2007

“Our method means doing exciting things with children, being together, letting everyone speak, documenting, telling our stories to instigate change, identifying further action; and requires parents and practitioners to think and talk together about what children actually do and say. The understandings arrived at create locally valid tools, such as research stories, which can be used both to assess the fitness for purpose of existing services, and to commission new services.” (from www.bigwidetalk.org)

Big Wide Talk has been working to develop a method and tools useful to parents, practitioners and planners. We presently work in six local authorities and we have just completed a study in Cornwall following an exhibition, *Our New School*, which involved 2500 children and nearly 1000 adults. This has resulted in a wealth of material directly relevant to many areas of children’s services, including education. 63 settings covering the range of early years provision in the county were involved and 50 of them have contributed to the subsequent analysis of the shared experience. (See Big Wide Talk’s forthcoming publication: *Our Outstanding Children, Cornwall 2007*.)

We wish to draw your attention to the way in which our methods and tools, developed over six years, complement the work of settings with children in the Early Years Foundation Stage, particularly using our Exhibitions as an example of one of our starting points.

In the past two years we have set up Exhibitions in areas of need in Bristol; Plymouth; Cornwall; Devon, and York. We have followed up the work by visiting Early Years settings in the public, private and voluntary sector (including child minders), and producing a growing archive of stories that are “co-authored”. Our overwhelming impression of the Early Years settings we have visited has been that in seeking to do the best for their children, they have implemented diligently and unstintingly the KEEP principles; and that those requirements have caused them to engage in massive amounts of planning, paperwork and inevitable checklists around the Early Learning Goals. They will surely welcome in *Creating the Picture*, the Primary Strategy’s reaffirmation of the holistic approach to the key themes of the unique child; positive relationships; enabling environments, and learning and development: **“It is not possible to ‘chop them up’ and meet their requirements with a tick list.”** (*Creating the Picture*, page 5).



Our method of setting up Exhibitions in schools and children's centres embodies the four key themes of the EYFS. It puts what children say and do at the heart of the assessment process by providing spaces for children that are assembled using an eclectic blend of real and cloth artefacts. The importance of space and abundance, which was clear to us from our early research findings, is a key feature of the experiences offered. Space is something which many settings lack. Practitioners are acutely aware of this and welcome the opportunity to see children's responses in the large areas we set up. The inclusive capacity for the spaces to enable almost all children to engage in self-directed or child-initiated play over comparatively long periods of time, affords practitioners the time and freedom to observe what the children they bring to the exhibitions do independently. The children (with prior consent) are filmed. Cameramen have become adept at following a child through an encounter, and the footage becomes part of the documentation, which the adults use to inform and extend their understanding of individual children's abilities, interests and needs.

The importance of the footage in the area of observational assessment is that it captures moments of individual child-initiated play, "**spontaneous but important moments**", (principal 3 of early childhood observational assessment) and holds those moments in their entirety. However, these are also edited with parents and practitioners to highlight relevant pieces that become the starting points for shared conversation. The contributions of the parents and practitioners are written from a range of perspectives and are recorded in shared Encounter Stories, which develop from what we each see and understand; the knowledge we bring; what questions are raised, and what we think we might do next. Parents also make their own Parent Authored Profiles, which stand alongside the collaboratively written Encounter Story.

Together they become a composite profile, which is a powerful tool for settings to use in making decisions on what they will provide next for the child, what adult-led activities might be planned, and which services might need to be involved. "**The only accurate – and therefore acceptable – way of assessing young children's learning is through gathering evidence from observations and information from parents, the child's own views and those of other professionals involved with the child.**" (*Creating the Picture*, page 11).

It is worth recording here that we believe that children state their views through the activities in which they engage, but we also value the opportunity for children to revisit and talk about they have done by



watching the film footage. For instance, William, who is deaf, relived his experience on our climbing wall by describing step by step to his teaching assistant what he remembered as he watched the footage. (See *I made it long and long*, Mabe Primary School, Cornwall, found in *Our New School* research stories at www.bigwidetalk.org).

The significance and application of our methods and tools within the CAF process is self evident as is the integral part played by ICT. It supports all our work - in observation, documentation and co-authoring - and our methods and tools are web-based. Co-authoring can and does take place using the website, although initial meetings and conversations are always the first step in the process.

Case studies:

The St Columb Major research story

Members of the Big Wide Talk national team co-authored the story with parents and practitioners both during the *Our New School* exhibition (Oct 2006) and in the follow-up development days:

“For those of us who attended *Our New School* and those of us who have watched the footage we are entirely positive about the experience that our children had. They were consistently inquisitive and engrossed. In every area of *Our New School* they worked collaboratively. Sometimes there was enormous collaboration even when there was little conversation. We believe that they were showing us how they are learning to co-operate, share, work together and communicate creatively. We have been intrigued by the extent to which they tolerated each other's strategies and stories. We believe they were socially comfortable and we were pleased to see how our minority ethnic group children were easily integrated within the student body.

We were also fascinated by the detail available to us about individual children. Individual parents have been eager to take home pieces of footage about their own child and sometimes their own child playing with others. Some of us have sought to present the footage to external practitioners working with our children.

It was important to us to give as many children as possible the experience of *Our New School* and we attended with 120 children and 40 adults(...)Since attending *Our New School* we took time to make an initial first edit of our footage at the exhibition editing suite, made arrangements



with the Big Wide Talk team to follow up with our children and parents resulting in recorded sessions of conversation with each of the four classes who attended and their practitioners, and a separate two-hour session for the parents held in the school, attracting 21 parents.

Big Wide Talk Team: We very much appreciated and enjoyed the opportunity to meet with the children and parents. We therefore have an extremely rich composite picture of St Columb Major's shared experience and ambition.

It was good to see the children who are sometimes quiet in school playing for such sustained periods. It was good to see the children visibly solving problems. They were extremely excited by the dark spaces and their 'great roar' in the darkness of the Colourbox was a wonderful, positive noise. Children are so often told to be quiet. We were fascinated to watch the older girls and a four-year-old discuss the rules of love and play. "A four-year-old can't love a six-year-old. You have to be the same age or the boy has to be older. It's against the law." It is lovely to see these children exploring the interaction between public rules and personal lives. We are very keen that our children learn as much as possible. It was therefore wonderful to see the systematic enquiries in the Colourbox; their questioning about where the rainbows were coming from and how the torches interacted with the rainbows. We would very much like to continue to discuss scientific principles on the basis of this initial exploration. At the climbing wall we were fascinated to see the wide range of responses. Some climbed with determination whilst others chose to exercise their political skills in detailed negotiation with the climbers about what they would and wouldn't do. We were also stunned by the concentrated collaboration of the children in the kitchen, the farmyard and the supermarket. They were not still for a second and, with great poise and determination, worked around the seated adults taking advantage of sympathetic adult interaction, for example at the supermarket till, when this was available. Interestingly there were no fights, there were no tantrums, there were no injuries. Our children were outstanding. We have agreed to try to create a series of small films including footage from the day and the children's memories. These films will embroider and bring to life this co-authored research story. We would very much like to repeat this experience. This kind of experience should be available all the time." (From *St Columb Major*, St Columb Major Primary School, Cornwall, found in *Our New School* research stories at www.bigwidetalk.org).

This, along with 90 other stories, informed the *Our Outstanding Children, Cornwall 2007* report, with accompanying film and Participative Planning



DVD. *The Our Outstanding Children Film*, a movie compiled from all the research and wealth of film clips we had from the Our New School exhibition, was shown in the Cloth Cinema, at Pencoys Primary School and Bodriggy Primary School in July 2007, and gave the parents, practitioners and children a chance to relive the experience and see how the research had been brought together. There was also a preview of the film shown, attended by the Children's Commissioner for England, Professor Al Aynsley-Green. Not only was he able to watch the film but he was also able to meet a number of the children who originally attended the *Our New School* exhibition and talk about their experiences with them.

“We looked at the Foundation Stage Profile Handbook. We thought the understanding in relation to shape space and measures that Sam and Louis demonstrate has similarities to the understandings of the children in the case study of the Sand Play activity on page 80. They use language to compare quantities (SSM ELG7), and are demonstrating mathematical ideas and methods to solve the practical problem of how their height compares with that of the giraffe (SSM ELG8). Sam is keen to ensure that Louis stands up straight so that their judgements are accurate. They maintain concentration for as long as necessary to solve the problem (DA ELG8) and work taking turns (SD ELG4). Louis takes account of the Sam's ideas (SD 9). In their conversation about the size of the giraffe, they 'reflect on and modify their actions' (LCT3).” (See *Measuring the giraffe, Bouncers Day Nursery, Cornwall*, found in *Our New School* research stories at www.bigwidetalk.org)

“We have a window on this child's thinking and how she is beginning to conceptualise measurement and the maths that go with it. ('Huge.' 'It's so big tall, isn't it.')” (See *Measuring the giraffe, Bouncers Day Nursery, Cornwall*, found in *Our New School* research stories at www.bigwidetalk.org)

“We felt the Colourbox was useful for us as a class. The Colourbox contains exciting activities which we can all come at from our own knowledge base, investigate and take our thinking further in order to develop our understanding of all that is happening here and its relevance to what we see in the world. Using the photographs from the exhibition the children have written down and told their teacher what they remember of what they did in the Colourbox. The teacher has found that there is a match with the Knowledge and Understanding of the World element of the Early Years Curriculum.” (See *The Colourbox, Mabe Community Primary*



School, Cornwall, found in *Our New School* research stories at www.bigwidetalk.org)

“I knew from observing Rose in Nursery that she learns new skills by watching and listening carefully, often from a distance, and not usually conversing at this stage. She then progresses to copying, and learns from her repeated attempts.” (See *Rose at the washing line*, St Josephs School, Cornwall, found in *Our New School* research stories at www.bigwidetalk.org)

“The Big Wide Talk exhibition, which had seemed so daunting and worrying at the outset, became a day of freedom and exploration in a totally unstructured environment. A day to let go! A day just to be. The children went scurrying from room to room seeking one new adventure after another.” (See *Treyew Story*, Treyew Primary School, found in *Our New School* research stories at www.bigwidetalk.org)

“The girl shines her torch over the coloured lights on the wall. The boy tosses his penguin high into the air and then runs to throw himself against the wall. They both dance and run. They have different ways of exploring.”
- **Carclaze Community Infant School, ‘Spotlights’** (See *Spotlights*, Carclaze Community Infant School, found in *Our New School* research stories at www.bigwidetalk.org)

We believe our methods and tools exemplify the KEEP principles and are powerful vehicles for professional development. Practitioners who brought children to our exhibitions have told us that the opportunity has enhanced their understanding of the importance of observations in Assessment and Record Keeping. Examples of comments made by practitioners in the co-authoring process following the *Our New School* Exhibition in Cornwall include:

“There are so many ways to do observations, and none of them are quite right. It always means taking a staff member away from other things. At the exhibition, you could just sit and watch.”
Supervisor, Willows Educare.

“We have watched the footage with the parents and BWT. It is still part of our lives and what the children do even now. We have used the footage to observe children, to share their experience with their parents, and to take conversations with children further.”

“It’s not been planned but look what’s unraveling from it.”



“I personally learnt to stand back.”

Staff, Newquay Pre-school.

Furthermore, attendance at our Exhibitions has caused settings to reflect on **“the effect of their provision on children’s development and learning.”** (*Creating the Picture*, page 10):

“The role play area was always a home corner, but since Our New School we have changed the role play area five times.” Reception teacher, Gulval Primary, Cornwall.

“The colour box was inspirational. We did it back at the Centre. We blocked out an entire corner.” Nursery Nurse, Treverbyn Trailblazers.

“At the exhibition we noticed the children sweeping and gathering and tipping and emptying...We collected all the leaves from the field and the children swept and filled and emptied them. Then we got 3 barrels of ice and emptied them outside for the children to crunch and bang and tip.” Manager, Willows Educare.

All the stories on which we have worked with settings and families are stored on our website. They can be used by settings as part of the formative assessment process. They are **“accessible to all concerned adults including parents, and they are in a form which allow all concerned adults including parents to make their contributions.”** (*Creating the Picture*, page 22). Some of the stories, with the consent of the parents, are made public and used by Big Wide Talk in our work to change and improve services and outcomes for children. Individual stories contribute to better outcomes for all children.

We think it is unlikely during the last two years that any other organization has engaged so many early years practitioners and parents in conversation about and documentation of what their children actually say and do. We are therefore uniquely placed to contribute to the consultation process of *Creating the Picture* and commend the use of our methods and tools to you as a coherent process which is applicable to the assessment of individual children’s needs and across the full range of impacts and outcomes that relate to children and families and the practitioners who deliver their services. We believe that some of our case studies could sit alongside those you have already included.

One of our long-term aims is to increase our partnerships and have a presence in every Local Authority so that we can complement their work of providing locally appropriate services for children and families. We



would welcome the opportunity to demonstrate the relevance and diversity of our methods and tools further.