# BRIC

## Childhood, public spaces, democracy

### Pilot Project

oct. 2013 - jan. 2014



Erasmus+



# *The Young Children, Public Spaces and Democracy Project (BRIC)*

**Introduction**

*The BRIC Project is for 3 years from January 2015. The project involves preschool teachers, young children and parents in exploring democratic engagement in public and civic spaces. The project is funded by the European Union and led by Professor Tim Waller at Anglia Ruskin University (UK) with Patrizia Benedetti, Azienda Speciale Bassa Reggiana (Italy) and Monica Hallborg, Barnpedagogiskt Forum (Sweden).*

**BRIC Pilot Project**

*A pilot project was established to explore the validity of the BRIC model of cross-cultural dialogue, documentation and reflection between preschool teachers in three countries; England, Italy and Sweden. The pilot took place between November 2013 and February 2014 in preschools in each of the three countries.*

*The BRIC Pilot project is reported in detail in this booklet and there is also an accompanying film available on the project website: bricproject.org.*

*We are very grateful for the participation and collaboration in the BRIC pilot by all the preschool teachers in Italy, Sweden and England.*

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# *BRIC Pilot Project Summary*

*The BRIC pilot project was established to explore the validity of the BRIC model of cross-cultural dialogue, documentation and reflection between preschool teachers in three countries; England, Italy and Sweden. Specifically, BRIC is focused on young children's democratic engagement in public spaces. The pilot project helped the project team and participants to better understand the process of what democratic engagement might look like and what might promote or hinder the process in preschools.*

*The BRIC pilot project demonstrated that there was a generally very positive response to the BRIC project, from all preschool teachers and head teachers in the three countries involved. In addition, both the process and the nature of the poly-vocal dialogue between the participants and their documentation and reflection on children's engagement in public spaces (in the pilot), will be very useful in informing the design and implementation of a large scale and longitudinal BRIC project. The pilot has shown how an exchange of 'good practice' between preschool teachers in three countries is be feasible and that systematic education and training around democratic engagement in public spaces is both desirable and highly valuable for the preschool teachers continuing professional development leading to deeper reflection and understanding.*

*In particular, what we learned from the pilot was:*

- *How children's voice could be enabled in public spaces*
- *The practice of democratic engagement and the importance of time for reflection on this process*
- *When it may be appropriate for children to leave a mark in a public space*
- *The benefits and limitations of leaving children to explore public spaces without adult interaction.*
- *The participating preschool teachers in England, Italy and Sweden agreed that for the main BRIC project the starting point is the dialogue with children and that there is a need for sustained and frequent engagement in a particular place – or public space.*

*Also, for the BRIC project to succeed it is important for the children to leave traces of their engagement and the project must involve and inform local politicians and policy makers as well as parents.*

# Pilot Project – Sweden

The general definition of "public spaces" (Right of public access) in Sweden is: "You make use of the right of public access when you go for a walk in the forest, paddle a kayak, go climbing or just sit on a rock and think. The right of public access applies both on land and water. In nature close to population centres the right of public access is all the more important It enables many people to take part in nature activities close to home without going away. In populated areas many people live side by side, sometimes in crowded spaces. The right of public access makes it easier for all of us to coexist in nature in a respectful manner and to avoid conflicts and wear and tear on the land.

Almekärrs preschools, consists of 5 houses, is situated close to forest, lake and horse stables. Preschools in Kärra area 1 are located in a residential area close to major roads, Kärra Square, River and Forest. The focus groups first meeting was the 7 January 2014. Participants in the discussion was attended by five teachers from Kärra area 1 and five teachers from Almekärr area. We documented by videotape. Then both focus groups meet and in this conversation the group was consisting of ten teachers. Together we looked at the videotapes and made a summary of our discussion.

## What do we mean by public spaces?

There are places that we visit with the children. Most of the sites are located adjacent to the preschool. In these places, we meet other adults and



also animals. It is democratic spaces where we can share the experiences of others.
If we let the children take their place in society, it may eventually become democratic. We let the children make a mark on the place they are visiting. It is becoming democratic meetings between people when the children are visible on squares and other public places. This gives children the opportunity to display their thoughts and opinions.

- Pre-school
- Pre-school yard
- Forrest
- Streets
- Square
- The local beach
- Park
- Library
- All public facilities

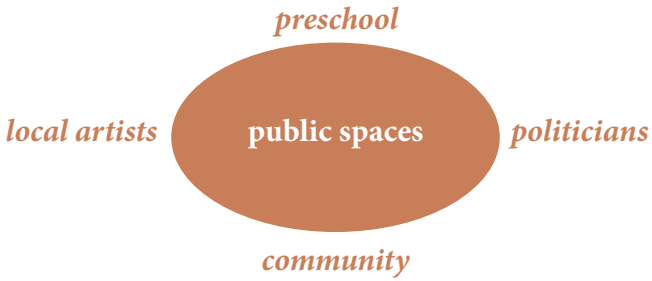
A democratic meeting is when you are affected and can influence by listening and arguing. – Citizen's / children's opportunities to be active co-creators of the future. To be a democratic citizen in their own town and neighborhood. That the children are citizens who are taken seriously. The fact that children have a right to see the world from different perspectives.



*(Kärra, Gothenburg)*

## Which public spaces would you want to use with children?

The pre-school yard – develop this into a meeting place.
Retirement home – cooperate in some way.
Let the children make some kind of mark for example a painting or their wise words in scripted on stone slabs in the square.
Let the parents and grandparents knowledge and experiences be a part of our public space, the pre-school.
Streets and squares – become a larger part of the society. Sweden is segregated in many different ways.
These different aspects can be joined together:
We would like the children to be a bigger part in our community by for




example helping to plan new pre-schools and other local facilities when building a new area.

- Square
- Housing for the elderly
- Senses Garden
- Theatre
- Libraries
- Forests
- River
- Gothenburg, museums and concert halls



*(Preschool day in Kärra)*

## How could you democratically engage young children in these spaces?

We need to organize and plan our excursions because some of the locations require travel by bus.
If we develop our partnership with parents, they may assist in the excursions, etc.
We want to be at square, library and retirement home continuously.
Every year at the Preschool Day we are in the square and have activities where our children are painting , singing and talking to all visitors. We also exhibit at the library once / year where we show what we are working on our preschool . We have begun a collaboration with retirement home, where we encountered, the elderly and children. There is a garden called the Senses Garden, it is also a meeting place ; old – children.
Our vision is to be more visible in square and the library , not just when it's Preschool Day. We want continuity. We let the children take responsibility when we borrow books from the library , they themselves can ask the librarian. We can present the preschool in display window in shops.
We would have to start off by finding out what earlier experiences, interests and knowledge the children have of these spaces. If we want the children to become engaged in these areas we have to take their perspec-

tive and ask open questions. It is when the children feel that their point of views are taken seriously by the pre-school teachers that they also get even more interested and inspired.

The children realize that their voices are heard and taken seriously that they have an opportunity to make an affect in these spaces. It is, primarily, the public spaces in the pre-school that are easiest for the children to make differences in. These include the pre-school yard, the Piazza and a room adjoined to the Piazza where activities that include a lot of movement can be held. It is harder for the children to affect public areas such as the town square..



*(Götaplatsen, Gothenburg)*

## Some reflections

The discussions in the focus group have engaged the pedagogues very much. The pedagogues have reflected both in filosofical and practical ways. There has been connections between the goals of the preschools and the aim of the planned project BRIC. The discussions in the focusgroups have disseminated to and stimulated all the pedagogues in the preschools. The discussions have also widened the interest of the pedagogues to involve parents and politicians.

The interpretation of the task for the focusgroups has been a litte bit different. That´s why it is very important to communicate between the different preschools and countries.

# Pilot Project - England

In England preschools are usually termed 'settings' and are run by the state, private companies or voluntary bodies.There are also a number of registered 'Childminders' who provide education and care for children in their home. Most settings are private. Preschool teachers are normally called 'practitioners' in England and children attend primary school in the September after their fourth birthday. Preschool teachers from two settings participated in the pilot project and also a research seminar was held on 26 February 2014 with representatives from both preschools in addition to practitioners from other settings and academics and students interested in the project.

*[Note: Access to 'public spaces' in England and the UK. There is no publically owned space or land in the UK. All land and buildings is owned by someone, such as a business, council, charity and public access is by permission only.]*

### Setting One - A Nursery School located in a housing estate in a large Town

(Children aged 2.5-4 years) An initial meeting with all staff (13) was held to preview questions and record images of potential sites for democratic engagement. Focus Group Discussion using images on 23 November 2013 was held with 6 practitioners and two students – the discussion was voice recorded.

### Setting Two - A Private Outdoor Day Nursery in a rural setting near a city

(Children aged 6 months – 4 years) An initial meeting with staff (6) to preview questions and record images of potential sites for democratic engagement was held. This meeting was followed by a Focus Group Discussion using images on 9 December 2013 held with 2 senior practitioners, which was voice recorded. Cooking sausages in the nursery wood – January 2014.

For both Focus Group meetings discussion was under the following three questions: Re-conceptualizing public spaces as places for children: some questions…

## What do we mean by public spaces?

In the urban pre-school public spaces were defined as 'local spaces used daily by the families and children' such as:

- Pavement (or footpath)
- Park
- Local shopping centre
- Church
- Pub
- Library
- Doctor's Surgery
- Open green spaces
- Woods
- Community Centre



There was also agreement that 'public spaces can include buildings as well as open spaces'. In the rural setting one preschool teacher commented: 'We tend to be outdoors and rural in this area. We tend to see children most often in indoor public spaces such as the local shopping centre. When we talk to most children about this there is a shared understanding – unlike with many other facilities'. In the rural preschool, teachers discussed 'local village amenities' such as:

- Recreation ground (park)
- Tithe Barn (not sure about access – village trying to buy it).
- Footpaths, bridleways, green lane and Roman road.
- Village hall ('it needs to be hired and there are barriers for young children')
- Churches/s graveyards
- Farmland museum
- The local Country Park ('many children are familiar with this – it has a 'Wild Place' – a log cabin and Forest School on Saturdays. It includes a large woodland area and grassland. This is more accessible to parents, especially at weekends'.)
- Archeological Dig

*[Note: Footpaths are 'public rights of way', bridleways are 'public rights of way' for walking, cycling and horse-riding and green lanes are traditional 'old' roads through the country normally with a natural surface].*

The preschool teachers also defined significant public spaces in the nearest town or city, such as:

- A large shopping centre (usually indoor)
- A Market Square

In the town where the urban preschool is located the Market Square was converted to a 'beach' for one week during August 2013.

- Park
- Library
- Town Hall
- Museum
- Country Park
- Botanic Gardens

## Which public spaces would you want to use with children?

In the urban preschool (which is state funded and subject to recent cutbacks in budget) comments were focused first on resources for organizing trips out of the preschool. 'We do not take the children out into the com-

munity as much we used to because of cut backs to staffing and greater pressure on the curriculum'. 'We stopped doing things that came naturally because of lack of resources'. 'There are time and resource implications for using public spaces. It's much harder to get parents involved now because of their (work) commitments'. 'Although we could do it occasionally we cannot use the public spaces regularly'. The preschool teachers agreed that key sites for use with the children could be:

- The pavement and immediate locality – 'it depends what you want to do'.
- 'The (local green open space) and the park.
- The Church and grounds – 'some children have never been to church'.
- The local shopping centre
- The woods
- Church
- Library
- The Bus stop
- The Community Centre

In the rural preschool the participants agreed: 'All of the above especially:
A city Museum – 'to challenge expectations'.
The Annual 'Festival of Ideas'.
Botanic gardens
Archeological dig.
The Country Park (Forest School) – 'because of local access'
A library – 'as most children do not get chance to go and there is no facility in the village'.

## How could you democratically engage young children in these spaces?

There was a wide-ranging discussion of this key question by practitioners in both settings. Much of the discussion was around the children leaving their 'mark' in the public spaces, rather than just simply accessing the spaces. There seemed to be a general agreement around the following comments: 'We could display children's art and documentation of learning – this could be done on a board with weather-proofing'. 'We might



*(Landbeach orchard)*

have to pay for the space like adverts at the bus stop. The wall on the side of the supermarket would be a prominent place – possibly ideal. Also the railings by the bus stop would be a good place to display'. There was also discussion about the potential of displays to be vandalized but the consensus was that if it looked good it might be left alone. In the urban preschool discussion at this point included suggestions such as: 'We could start by displaying on our own fence by the entrance facing out to the public view and if that worked we could expand it'. 'What about art on lampposts like in Reggio?'

'It could be in local streets or in the town centre' 'We are hoping to do some work with the local Community Centre – there is a working Café there run by 6th formers (students) from a special school open to the public as well as a shop and animal centre. This is a walk-able distance from the nursery'. 'We could discuss with other nurseries in the town about access to the market square at weekends for children as in Reggio'. [Note: There are four state nursery schools in the town, which have a network – most pre-school provision in the town is private]

Other significant comments made were: 'We would need to liaise with local councilors, county councilors and local (Member of Parliament) MP and businesses'. 'Also ask local printing companies to help out with high quality printing. We could ask our Chair of Governors who used to work for the County Council'. In the rural preschool discussion was focused on the organisations that may be involved in supporting democratic engagement, as well the possibility of networking: 'We need to think about which organisations could help, as well as places. We could work with other similar organisations and networks such as the local Children's Centre, which has space and wants to promote civic engagement. Also the county early years group and local nurseries'. 'We could also work with the National Trust (a national charity in the UK,founded in 1895 'with the aim of saving our nation's heritage and open spaces') and participate in public art displays. One of the part time preschool teachers also works part time in a city Museum. She noted that there were: 'Some challenging restrictions for children but the Museum has an educational facility and public gallery'. In 2013 this preschool teacher organised a mark-making workshop for young children as part of the city 'Festival of Ideas'. It was also suggested that a Facebook network was established for the UK BRIC group. Research Seminar held in Cambridge on February 26 2014 An overview of the rational, aims and design of the BRIC project was presented a long with a summary of the pilot project in Italy, Sweden and the UK. Discussion was focused around:

## How children's voice could be enabled in public spaces

The practice of democratic engagement and the importance of time for reflection on this process.

When it may be appropriate for children to leave a mark in a public space.

The benefits and limitations of leaving children to explore public spaces without adult interaction.

Reflection

There was a generally very positive response to the BRIC project, from all preschool teachers involved in the pilot. Summary of the key points:

1. The starting point is the dialogue with children.
2. We could access both local spaces familiar to the children and new places outdoors and indoors.

3. It takes time to share and disseminate Focus Group discussion.
4. There is a need for sustained and frequent engagement in a particular place.
5. It is important for the children to leave appropriate marks in some, but not all spaces.
6. We need to work with local networks and engage local politicians and policy makers as well as parents.

# Pilot Project - Italia

## What do we mean by public spaces?

The public spaces give the idea of something free, that you can access without paying.
Free also in the sense that it doesn't have enclosures.
The public spaces are spaces opened for the whole citizenship .
Spaces for well-being.
Everything that is outside of my door is a public space.
A space that is accessible and usable to everybody, even for persons with disabilities.
A space opened to differences, to persons with different cultural backgrounds and from different countries.
A space that can be created and transformed by the citizenship.
Spaces without limits, that can be built and shared together with the children.
It is a point of reference, a space for rituals.
It's a space that can be lived and experienced by more persons, starting from the small children, but also the whole citizenship, a place that can become a meeting point between different generations
Spaces of social cohesiveness



Places for sharing and listening, where different voices create the political and social sense of the community.

## Which public spaces would you want to use with children?

- Library
- Park
- Square
- Sidewalks
- Sport camp
- Theater
- Town hall
- Gym
- Cultural centers
- Hospital
- Streets
- Benches
- Infant-toddler center
- Swimming pool
- Cycle path
- Rest home
- Marketplace
- Fields
- Parking lot
- Stairs
- Monuments
- The neighborhood
- Balustrades
- Puddles

Timescale:

1. First meeting: 18th November 2013_We have conducted a focus group of pre-school teachers (divided into 3 groups of ten teachers each) to identify the local public spaces which may be sites for democratic engagement of children. We have started with discussion of what we mean by public spaces.
2. We have made a synthesis of the three voice recorded discussions and we have given feedback to all teachers in the second meeting
3. Between first and second meeting teachers made some photographs of these spaces and some of them have lived those spaces with children.

1. Second meeting: 20th January 2014_ We have conducted a second focus group of pre-school teachers (divided into 3 groups of ten teachers each) in which they view the public spaces and discuss how they can be sites for the democratic engagement of children.

**Group 1 - public space – park/forest**



*(the Golena near Po river in Brescello)*

## How could you democratically engage young children in these spaces?

Observe the children, their interests, in their explorations and giving them the photo cameras to see what is their point of view.
To change point of view, with binoculars, periscopes, magnifying glasses, in order to offer tools that permits them to make different observations.
Do it in a small group because in the big group maybe we lose some of the groups interests.
Live these places during different moments of nature's cycles.
Even with the youngest children we can start from their interest, because that is the engine of the research.
Open spaces invite to explore with the body.
It's important to explore the same places more times, because each time

you visit a place you find new elements.
When we told the parents that the children had used the photo camera they were stunned. It's a way to recognize the children abilities to experiment and use different tools. All of these explorations sustain the children's autonomy.
Here there is a summary of the three focus group discussions.
Within this horizon we can find our idea of child, the idea of a competent child, that "is capable of", with lots of possibilities and potentialities that continues to surprise us.
Offer them the opportunity to experience unusual places, like places of the territory, that identifies that particular territory.
For us it has been great to re-discover how the body is important in the experiences and the learning processes. Because just going out and perceiving the temperature is an opportunity for learning. (i.e.: staying in the fog gives different perceptions...). Outdoor there are many sensibilities that you usually don't explore, there are different sounds, perfumes, and other perceptions. The outdoor spaces sustains the imagination.
Through the body the children develops their autonomy and self-esteem: "I can, I'm able too!". It's a free way of tutoring.
It's important to leave traces on the territory.
The families become aware of how the children doesn't need things that are already structured, already perfect or prefabricated, to move their fantasy.
The children become like mediators with the families to help them to understand this. It's the children that teach the parents the way that they can use these spaces.
So, offering possibilities to make experiences and then sharing with the parents, makes sure that it becomes more democratic.
And it becomes even more democratic if it's not only spaces experienced by the children from our schools but by the whole community. If you inhabit and experience a place, then you take care of it more.

**Group 2 – public space – a square**



*(Bentivoglio square in Gualtieri)*

We can go outside with the children to make a project where they explore the spaces and the imagine how we could transform them, if there are things that we could add or change, ask them how they would like to live those spaces.
When I think about a square I dont think only about children, before it was a place where you met everybody and everything, it was a place that was characterized by the different seasons.
I have this feeling; the parents wouldn't know what to do in the square today.
I think that as a school we have a great challenge to offer some alternatives to the parents, according to me some parents don't know what to do in these places without games, without structured things, so maybe the pre-school can show how these places can be inhabited and experienced, it's a hard struggle, because sometimes it's seems like we have forgotten fantasy. Sometimes it's enough to leave them in these places and give them the opportunity to discover them.
Many times we expect to stay in safety places. But the square also means stay in a disordered and and not perfectly clean place.

According to me, if we begin to leave traces of the children, with the school and the involvement of families and grandparents, then maybe the citizens become curious. If we give an example maybe even other schools, with older children begin to use the public spaces. This might open up for a process where the citizens take care of the squares and use them in a democratic way. It's in the square where all generations can meet, it's the most excellent democratic space. According to me as a school we should begin from there, from staying in the square. We could also ask the families to share ideas of how we can use the square, for the wellbeing of their children.

Re-discover this spirit of gathering, beginning from the school, making sure that the parents can meet in the square. We could create a guide of the public spaces of the territory to put in the school. Where to we go? And proposals that we can realize.
So thinking of the square like a public space opened to everybody, a place that can be transformed. A place that can be used in different moments during the day, both by preschools and schools.

**Group 3: public space – a urban public building**




*(Gonzaga Palace in Guastalla)*

## How could you democratically engage young children in these spaces?

I think it is important to ask the children what they would like to have in that place, what it is missing and how they would like to
live it in a different way here. It is also important to have the opportunity to leave our marks/ traces inhabiting it with the children.
Probably using those places in other way, different from mental schemes or ideas of use we have. For example: the library or the
theatre. We've asked three years old children how they want to use or live these places. The theater has become a gym,
because they've found seats in a row so they were climbing up and down them, they made alternative paths and in the library they've decided it could be a place where you can make the music. We don't know how but we think it is important to try to live it differently and not usually as we do as adults or stereotypically.
Children should be involved in these thoughts of use of places, we could also bring materials of our school into the library or other public spaces so that children could recognize experiences and themselves.
It is not easy to know what really children would like to have and to do in public spaces, expecially with young children of 1 or 2 years old. As our educational philosophy says we think that the first democratic action is listening to young children, it means to give time to them to express themselves and give time to us as adult to observe them without expecting anything.
If we have the desire to have something that really involved children in a democratic way we have to consider that children of the infant toddler centre do not say what they want with their voice but with their behavior. We can use the strategy of "little group" experiences because in this way we can dedicate more time of self-expression to everyone. It is also important to help children to understand that they are a group and that they can chose what they want to do only if they respect also other willing.

The use made of spaces constrains what really makes the majority ,there are times to do certain things and moments to prevent them.
And it is true that, if we consider democracy as freedom, the free use of spaces of children has in itself the risk of anarchy that maybe it does not

coincides with our educational responsibility. How it is possible to keep together free expression of childhood and our responsibility? To give some limits it is also a protective need (especially in urban spaces that are dangerous, for example it is not possible to run in the middle of the road). Freedom end when we or children are denying other freedom…but this is something that remain theory until we start to discuss about real experiences and to put ideas of all subjects together.

More about:
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