



# Sense of Place Research Project

June 2016

**5x5x5=creativity**



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# 1. Introduction

**5x5x5=creativity** is an arts-based action research organisation with charitable status that supports children and young people in their exploration and expression of ideas, helping them develop creative skills for life. 5x5x5=creativity helps improve children and young people's life chances by developing their confidence in themselves as creative learners and thinkers whilst inspiring higher levels of motivation and engagement in their learning.

5x5x5=creativity was commissioned by Bristol Local Authority to deliver a research project with two year olds and their families to explore family heritage, culture and narrative with the aim of deepening aspiration and confidence in life-long and life-wide learning and parents' participation in their children's learning.

The **Sense of Place Research Project** involved families at early years settings across three areas of the city working alongside educators, family support workers and artists. The research project was designed with the aim of working with the families of young children to improve outcomes, reduce disadvantage and raise aspiration, in line with the finding of the DfE report *Performing against the odds: developmental trajectories of children in the EPPSE 3-16 study* (Siraj-Blatchford *et al*, 2010). Key implications from the *Performing against the odds* research brief (Siraj-Blatchford *et al*, 2011) included:

- Implications of 'active cultivation' for parenting programmes/initiatives are substantial as our study shows that in these cases the home as an institution is a very powerful 'proximal' context. This helps children to establish masterful learning dispositions towards school and learning and stimulates the development of self-efficacy.
- Parents who show 'active cultivation' provide strong, child-centred emotional support that is sensitive to the children's developing needs. They do so, even in the face of difficulties, by being encouraging, persistent and consistent.
- The importance of social and cultural capital has implications for schools and communities in fostering 'learning to learn' dispositions by providing support with educational experiences especially for 'vulnerable' children.
- Through our research processes we encourage enquiring minds, independent thinking and reflection;
- Many forms of communication ('the hundred languages' such as dance, drama, art, mathematics, music, technology, writing etc) contribute to the knowledge and understandings developed through research processes;
- Engagement with creative people with different skills and knowledge e.g. artists, philosophers, educators, family support workers etc. is an enriching experience within research;
- Schools and settings can be creative learning communities strongly linked to their own locality;
- An active partnership with parents and carers – we value the knowledge and experiences of families as a critical part of a child's development.

The research was underpinned by the principles of 5x5x5=creativity inspired by the approach in Reggio Emilia, Northern Italy. Drawing on 15 years of action research with early years settings and schools in the UK, the Sense of Place Research Project was based on the following principles:

- Processes not necessarily products - we are interested in *how* people are learning and *how* this informs their development;
- Documentation, reflection and evaluation are the basis of our on-going action research processes;
- Relationships and a sense of active citizenship are central to effective educational and research experiences;
- Dialogue, negotiation and companionship arise out of relationships and are formative in developing knowledge from research processes;

Whilst all participants have participated in the research and evaluation process, a core team from 5x5x5=creativity (Director of Research, PHD researcher, and artist educator mentors) have facilitated and developed these processes, bringing another layer of perspective, interpretation and analysis to the research emerging from the three research groups. Professor Iram Siraj has acted in an advisory capacity alongside the team.

Through this research we have explored the richness and complexity of peoples' lived experiences, exploring the power of the arts to contribute to improving outcomes, reducing disadvantage and raising aspirations within families and communities.

**Penny Hay, Director of Research, 5x5x5=creativity**  
[www.5x5x5creativity.org.uk](http://www.5x5x5creativity.org.uk)



## 2. Key themes

### Reflection and evaluation: a creative reflective cycle

Educators, artists and members of the 5x5x5=creativity research team and members of Bristol Early Years Service met at regular points throughout the project to dialogue and share significant stories emerging from the work with families in each setting. These meetings provided participants from each setting with opportunities to share documentation of the work they were engaged in with families, including photographs, artworks and the families voiced ideas and experiences. The sharing of key stories through this documentation, was used as a catalyst for discussion. Together, educators, artists and the research team reflected critically on the experiences that were emerging within each setting, identifying key themes that were significant to understanding the effects of the work on the communities involved and the particular aspects of the work that were important in generating these effects. Crucially, these themes emerged from the educators themselves, in discussion with the research team, reflecting on and naming those aspects of learning that were particularly important within the project. These themes were:

**Co-creating safe space:** The creation of nurturing safe, yet bounded spaces, both within and outside the setting. Creating spaces to talk, to be silent, to be immersed in creative processes and to interact and bond with others within authentic and caring relationships.

**Being and belonging:** Creating supportive community spaces in which people (educators, parents, children and artists) can encourage and learn from each other through discussion, making and sharing stories. Through creative activities, producing democratic spaces that encourage meaning making together as a community of learners.

**Qualities of relationships:** Reflecting on the qualities of professional and personal relationships. Developing authentic, strong and non-judgmental relationships through activities based on listening, sharing and relational pedagogies.

**Processes of art:** Using the arts and creative processes to develop ideas and make significant experiences visible. Artists as lenders of tools and materials, creating a cultural and aesthetic framework for learning.

**Connecting to home and place:** Understanding cultural contexts for individual families and communities, including particular challenges, tensions, how people live their lives, their values and what is important to them. Offering a generous space in which people can connect with ideas of home and place through the sharing of materials and activities.

**Perspectives:** Listening to and respecting different perspectives and voices. Through creative experiences enabling different perspectives to be seen and heard. Looking at community and place from different perspectives and through this recognizing and respecting the diversity of experience within the city.

**Time and Pace:** Valuing the time, space and attention it takes to develop authentic professional and personal relationships. Being mindful of the work with families developing at its own pace. Taking slow steps and letting the families guide you.

**Ways of learning:** Learning to learn in different ways through thoughtful engagement and problem solving as part of creative experiences. Modeling the power of experiential learning. Learning together, being alongside each other, engaging in sustained shared thinking with others.

**Parents agency:** Parents expressing their own creativity, modeling creative learning processes to their children. Parents feeling empowered to make their own choices, to be confident around other people in familiar group contexts and to have ownership and pride in their own creative work.



### 3. Understanding key concepts

**Generative potential of not knowing:** Not being told what to do. The power of not knowing what is going to happen. Holding onto uncertainty in a safe space and encouraging people to step into a place of not knowing where they can take risks and engage in authentic problem solving.

Throughout this book these themes provide a structure for talking about and reflecting on the stories shared. Whilst each story relates to multiple themes, those that are considered most significant are discussed in detail. Links to all related themes are listed at the end of each story.

#### Links to the Early Years Foundation Stage

The themes that emerged as significant to the Sense of Place research with families also link closely with the four overarching principles of the **Early Years Foundation Stage:**

**Unique child** (every child is a unique child, who is constantly learning and can be resilient, capable, confident and self-assured)

**Positive relationships** (children learn to be strong and independent through positive relationships)

**Enabling environments** (children learn and develop well in enabling environments, in which their experiences respond to their individual needs and there is a strong partnership between practitioners and parents and/or carers)

**Learning and Development** (children develop and learn in different ways and at different rates) (Department for Education, 2014)

The stories in this book highlight how relevant these themes are to adults and to work with families, as well as to children. Links to these principles are listed at the end of each story.

#### Links to 5x5x5=creativity

Thinking and research within 5x5x5=creativity has evolved based on four fundamental elements of practice, each of which links to the themes identified within the Sense of Place research.

**Creative values** (the competence and strength of the child, pedagogy of listening)

**Creative relationships** (attentive, respectful adults and children working collaboratively)

**Creative environments** (both physical and emotional)

**Creative behaviours and dispositions** (supporting creative thinking and learning dispositions; holistic learning)

(Bancroft et al, 2008)

The work within the Sense of Place project has been underpinned by a number of key concepts. Our particular understandings of these concepts are explained here and are illustrated in the stories shared throughout the book.

**Research:** Research processes within the Sense of Place project have been underpinned by ideas of collaborative meaning making. Knowledge produced within the project has emerged from critical dialogue between artists, educators, families and the wider research team, using a creative reflective cycle as a process of co-construction through which to make meaning of our experiences. The aim of research in this context has been to explore the richness and complexity of peoples lived experiences, exploring the power of the arts to contribute to improving outcomes, reducing disadvantage and raising aspirations within families and communities.

**Collaboration:** A spirit of collaboration and democratic participation has underpinned the Sense of Place project from the beginning. Our understanding of collaboration in this context is a recognition that everyone has their own skills, experiences and specialisms to bring to the project. Within each setting and across the research project as a whole, the aim has been to develop creative, collaborative learning communities, safe spaces in which everyone's contributions are valued. Parents and children have worked alongside artists and educators as co-learners and co-constructors of knowledge and experience.

**The image of the child:** Within the context of this research children are considered to be competent, capable and inherently creative. In line with the principles of 5x5x5=creativity, children of all ages are seen as 'innate and creative knowledge builders, explorers and co-constructors of their learning'.

**The image of the family:** This research is rooted in the notion that children are embedded within their own family cultures, which they bring with them into the early years setting. We recognise that all families are different and have their own histories and narratives that shape who they are. When working with families we recognise the importance of respecting these differences and of working together to build community aspiration and confidence in life-long and life-wide learning.

**Social and cultural capital:** Within this project we recognise and value the diversity and richness of social and cultural experience within families and communities. We consider that social and cultural capital has to do with the networks of relationships, in which families are embedded, that provide access to different resources and opportunities. Through engagement with artists and creative experiences, this project aims to support and encourage families to recognise the richness of their own cultural capital and to use this as a starting point for building community aspiration.

## 4. Introducing Knowle West

**Family engagement:** The work within the Sense of Place project has built on already strong practices of family engagement within each of the settings, recognising that parents and carers are a child's first educator and continue in that role throughout the course of their life-long learning. Strong and respectful professional relationships have been at the heart of this work, engaging families as co-researchers and collaborators. The ethos has been one of working *with and alongside* families in 'flat-level', democratic spaces, within which everyone's unique and valuable contributions to the project can be appreciated.

**The role of the artist:** The artist is primarily a facilitator, providing a wide vocabulary of processes (not necessarily products), materials and ideas for participants to explore; inviting people to be themselves, to explore their worlds and try out different ways of communicating 'in 100 languages' (Edwards et al, 1998). Making things together is often an effective way of allowing conversations to blossom; the playful and non-judgmental environment of a well facilitated art session allows new perspectives, ideas and identities to be explored.

Exploring the wider city promotes connection to it, and a greater sense of being and belonging; cultural centres become more accessible and inviting. Parents gain new perspectives on their city and gain visibility within it.

Seeing and discussing contemporary art is a way of stepping into public space, becoming part of the shared conversation which is culture. The artist enriches the city's democracy by inviting new people to become active audiences; to see, react and then create in response to the artwork they see.

"The artist is connecting communities with contemporary culture through familiarity and experience, bringing their understanding of different cultures in life and in the world and combining this with the experiences in the community". Deborah Aguirre Jones artist )

**The aesthetic third:** Within each setting, the collaboration between artists, educators and families has produced artworks such as a film, drawings, a large map and some textile paintings. These objects are seen as having a very particular role within the context of the project. Where we create an artwork or aesthetic object, it is distinct from social processes and interactions (as well as written/spoken language).

Two aspects of this difference are particularly valuable in socially engaged arts practice:

Making something which is physically outside of us enables a new perspective because we are looking at an entity which is not enmeshed in us; it is separate from the rawness, vulnerability and confusion of potential judgment. We can look at the object and consider it, considering parts of ourselves with spaciousness. We can invite other people to look at it too.

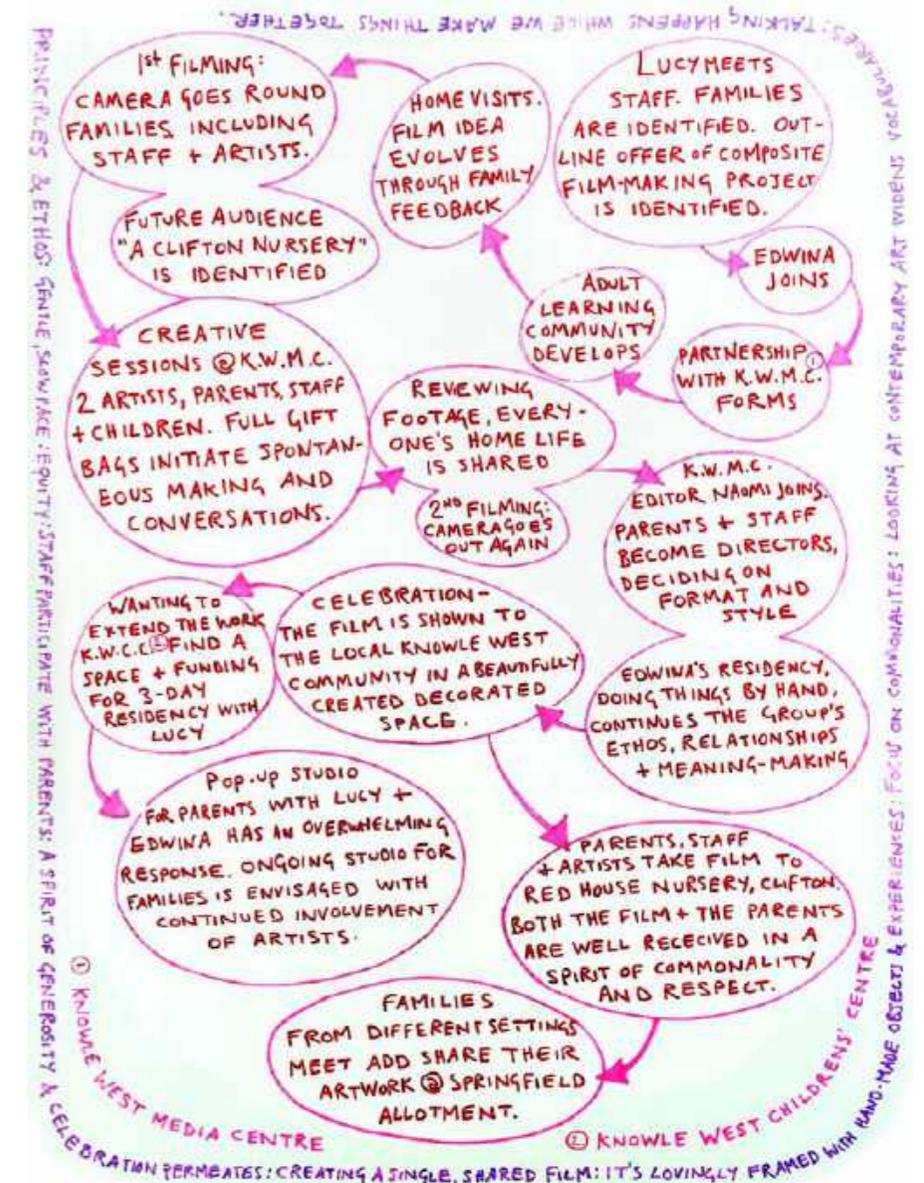
In viewing an artwork, there are an infinite number of interpretations, so when we show and share an artwork we have made, we are creating a proposition which is speculative or conditional - its meaning is not fixed but continuously re-becoming.

These concepts are illustrated in the narratives that are encountered throughout this book and underpin the spirit and ethos of the Sense of Place project as a whole.

### Knowle West Children's Centre

"Knowle West Children's Centre sits at the heart of Knowle West. We always strive to build up the strongest relationships we can with hundreds of children and their families. We know that working in true partnership and empowering families is at the core of what we do. We serve a richly vibrant and friendly community who have a definite sense of themselves. The proud spirit of families and children who come together in the Children's Centre creates something unique and special, which we love to celebrate in varied ways. That is why we were honoured to be part of a collaboration between families and artists in making a film and really getting to the bottom of why Knowle West is such a special place." (Sarah, Head teacher)

Artists Lucy Cassidy and Edwina Bridgeman worked together with the staff and families at Knowle West Children's Centre and Inns Court Nursery over a period of 2 years. A map of their creative, collaborative process is depicted to the right.







## Making the film

**"We All Feel the Same Rain"** is a film made by children who are two years old, with their families and staff from Knowle West Children's Centre and Inn's Court. Wearing a 'Go-Pro' camera, the children have filmed all aspects of family life providing a unique glimpse of the world through children's eyes. The film-making journey has provided an opportunity for the families and staff to open the doors of their homes to one another, allowing us to celebrate everything that is unique to us, together with the many things we have in common." (Sense of Place team, Knowle West)

### Being and belonging

"As practitioners we know a lot about our families, we go on home visits, we see their houses and perhaps expect them to tell us lots of things, but we don't give anything back. But on this project it's making you realise you can be more open and share those little home details, that they are as interested in hearing our stories as we are about theirs." (George, educator)

"In our project the staff are making films alongside the parents and we're filming in our own homes. Members of staff have said that sharing on that level, which is pretty intimate in a way, is the most profound, the deepest relationship they've had with families so far." (Lucy, artist)



### Reflections

Throughout the project, educators have explored ideas of professionalism and professional relationships. The equitable sharing of experiences enabled through the film prompted reflections on the nature of educators' relationships with families and the possibilities, through the creative processes brought by the artist, for creating more 'flat-level' spaces in which traditional power dynamics were disrupted and which enabled a sense of being and belonging for all who were involved.

### Co-creation of safe space

The team involved in developing the film within the project at Knowle West Children's Centre reflected on how working in this way with parents had given them an opportunity to reflect on their ideas of professionalism and professional relationships and how the process of making the film together had enabled them to develop deeply authentic and democratic relationships with families.

"I think it's being open, being more open as a practitioner and being able to feel that you can be – feeling able, or perhaps allowed to be more open with a parent." (George, educator)

"Bringing our whole selves. As practitioners we've brought our children to the sessions, made films about our dogs, mums, and on the Go-Pro it's really close up. There's something about being that close." (Lucy, artist)

"Even Shannon who's been running the crèche is also making a film as well. There's two things there really, something about being flat level and about creating safe space." (Lucy, artist)



## Reflections

An important theme within the project has been the co-creation of safe space. The relationships fostered between the artists, educators and families have been built on mutual respect and trust. Throughout the process of filming and sharing, the team commented on the importance of these relationships being non-judgmental. The success of the project was in part due to the slow and careful attention, by the artists and educators, to the creation of spaces in which all those involved could 'bring their whole selves', in ways that were safe and protected.

The creative process of making the film was important in this respect as from the beginning the team recognized the importance of creating a non-hierarchical space in which everyone: parents, children, educators and artists; was involved in making the film. Filming, editing, production and sharing were engaged in together, and everyone's contributions and skills were recognised and valued.

**Sense of place themes:** Qualities of relationships; Perspectives; Time and Pace; Being and belonging; Co-creation of safe space

**EYFS key themes:** Positive relationships; Unique child –unique family; Learning and development; Enabling environment



## We All Feel The Same Rain

### Viewing the world through the eyes of our children

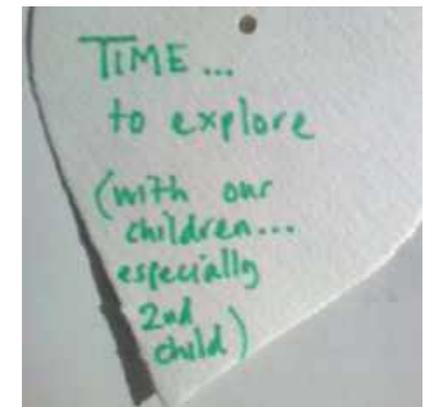
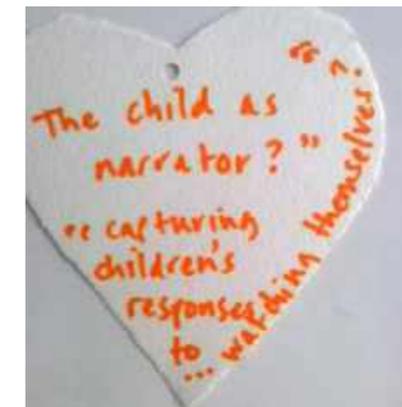
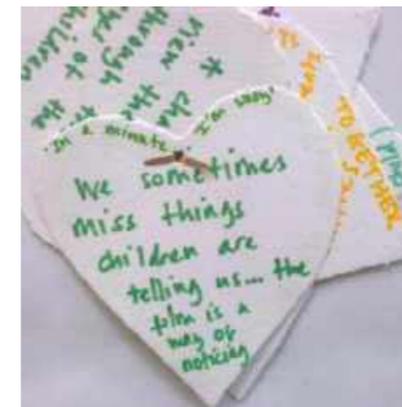
During the process of viewing and editing the film at Knowle West Media Centre, artists, educators and parents commented on the benefit of having the opportunity to observe the world from the child's perspective. Edwina recalled parents' comments about how insightful it had been to watch the footage - rather than being frustrated at a child's slowness and indirect route coming up the path into the house, it became clear that there are many interesting and valuable things to be discovered on the journey.

*"Sometimes you can get it wrong – misunderstand as a parent."* (Parent)

*"We had conversations when we were watching each other's films about what it's like - seeing things for the first time and being able to talk about that. One of the parents commented that 'I don't take the time to sit and watch what they do'. It made her feel guilty, but through being involved in this project it's something that we're able to do and think about more, how children do view the world and see things."* (Kate, educator)



The spirit of inclusivity, collaboration, democratic processes and mutual respect that had been so significant for everyone involved in the making of the film also underpinned the naming of it.





“When we were thinking about ideas for the title of the film, it was one of the parents that suggested that it be called *We All Feel the Same Rain* because we were having a conversation about how we wanted it to represent what happens for families in Knowle West, that we’re all unique and individual, but that we all experience some of the same things. Every person’s film had essentially the same things in it, children eating, children going to bed, children going out for walks to the park, that we all do.” (Kate, educator)

The families are proud of the film they have made and have shared it with parents and staff of Red House Nursery, Redland. Matt (Learning Co-ordinator) reflected on the visit: “It was interesting that for a project all about a sense of place that parents would want to take their film to show other parents in other places- especially places seen as very different (in this case, an affluent area of North Bristol). The idea that the parents wanted to “show them what Knowle West is all about” was evident, but after the visit, so too was their understanding that these parents might live in different geographical and economic locations to them, but everyone had their



children in common. This visit broke down all kinds of fixed barriers, some of them towards what Knowle West can be as a place and others about what Redland might represent.”

The ethos has been of ‘sharing not showing.’ The group felt the importance of those who watch the film having a sense of its context through the voices of the community and those involved. “The film is quite protected, it opens vulnerability – we’re going into each other’s homes, so it shouldn’t just be put up on a website – if you want to see the film you almost have to also see the people who made it to get the essence.” (Harry, Family Support) The families involved in its production have a sense of ownership over what they have produced and the team have felt strongly that when sharing the film with others, whether that be other families, communities or in professional contexts, that sharing should happen through the voices of the families themselves.



### Reflections

Through the making of the film parents and educators gained from viewing the world through the eyes of the children, gaining new perspectives and reflecting on the value of children’s play. It facilitated greater active listening and exchange (between children and adults) that affected parents’ views on parenting.

The naming and story of the film are really powerful metaphors for the themes of togetherness, participation and collaboration that have underpinned these projects from the start. Actively respecting the families rights to have control over how their lives and community are represented recognises and values their sense of agency and reinforces the view that these parents are powerful agents in their own lives and the lives of their children.

This ethos and qualities of relationships, developed over time, allowed educators to really reflect on the qualities of their professional relationships and alongside the artists to think about how they work authentically in partnership with parents.

**Sense of place themes:** Perspectives; Qualities of relationships; Co-creating safe space; Being and belonging; Time and pace; Validation and visibility; Parental agency

**EYFS key themes:** Positive relationships; Unique child –unique family; Learning and development; Enabling environment

## The joys of playing

In Knowle West Media Centre, where Edwina was in residence for the week, a group of parents with their children and educators sat alongside each other around a table spread with calico. This residency had come about after a period of intensive work between the artists (Lucy and Edwina), staff from the children's centre and families, including parents and children. The focus of this work, with the support of the media centre, had been the filming and production of a film documenting and celebrating the lives of the people in the community.

### Ways of Learning

"What emerged from this was the value of the freedom to play, for all of us, and the fact that there was no hierarchy, the peer mentoring amongst the group was very strong." (Edwina, artist)

"We were working with one of the children and her mum and we'd just watched the film and what had come through so powerfully was the children reintroducing us to play, and how their play is just so fantastic and spontaneous. I was sitting with the little girl and mum was over making the table cloth. The little girl said, "Do you feel like a big kid now mum?" and she said "Oh yeah" and laughed. It was so lovely that had happened as a result of the film. So the children reminding us of that joy of playing." (Edwina, artist)

### Qualities of relationships

"I worked with the little girl who created this, she's five and has a sister, and they're both in the film with their mum. She made a beautiful boat, with tapes and paint and we talked about where we would go in the boat. She proceeded to paint a river an island that was accessible by two bridges, an X marking the spot where the treasure is and a lighthouse. She was engaged in the painting for 45 minutes, talking all the time about the river and the island. She was completely absorbed in her story.

Nearing the end of the session we started to talk about how we can visit the island – 'How can we get there?' This was extremely important to her so we kept thinking. 'I know' she said, 'We can dream it'. It was such a brilliant solution. We both sat there, putting the ideas in our heads that we were going to try and dream ourselves there that night. When we were washing the brushes she said, 'Best day ever', and as she left she said, 'See you tonight'." (Edwina, artist)

In response to the creative experiences and workshops within Knowle West Media Centre, the educators and artists set up a pop-up art space within the centre in which families could work alongside each other, and alongside educators and artists in a variety of creative activities. Discussing this space as a legacy of the project Harry (educator) commented:

"It highlighted that there is a need for adults to be creative and to have the time to spend on it. It was an aspect of nurturing themselves, taking that time, sitting there, being focused, everyone relaxes – it is a very relaxing atmosphere."

### Reflections

Throughout the project this story was told and retold as a powerful example of the reflexivity and reciprocity that developed within the relationships among the families, educators and artists involved. It was discussed as being a strong example of sustained shared thinking and problem solving between a child and an adult, the collective creative process of making the tablecloth providing a context for encouragement and engagement that allowed the child to think and explore her ideas creatively. Strong, trusting and respectful relationships were key to creating this context, in which thoughtful engagement, problem solving and opportunities to be playful, for both adults and children, were enabled through the creative process. The documentation and sharing of the story also gave visibility and public value to the child's deep level thinking, allowing others to witness her creativity and the relationships through which it was allowed to flourish. The development and use of the pop up art space within the centre showed the value placed on both children and parents having the opportunity to explore their own creativity. The work within the Sense of Place project prompted the development of this space and highlighted the potential of creative experiences, working alongside an artist, to enrich the lives of families.

**Sense of Place themes:** Co-creating safe space; Processes of art; Perspectives; Validation and visibility; Ways of learning; Qualities of relationships

**EYFS themes:** Enabling environments; Positive relationships; Unique family; Learning and development



# 5. Introducing Hartcliffe

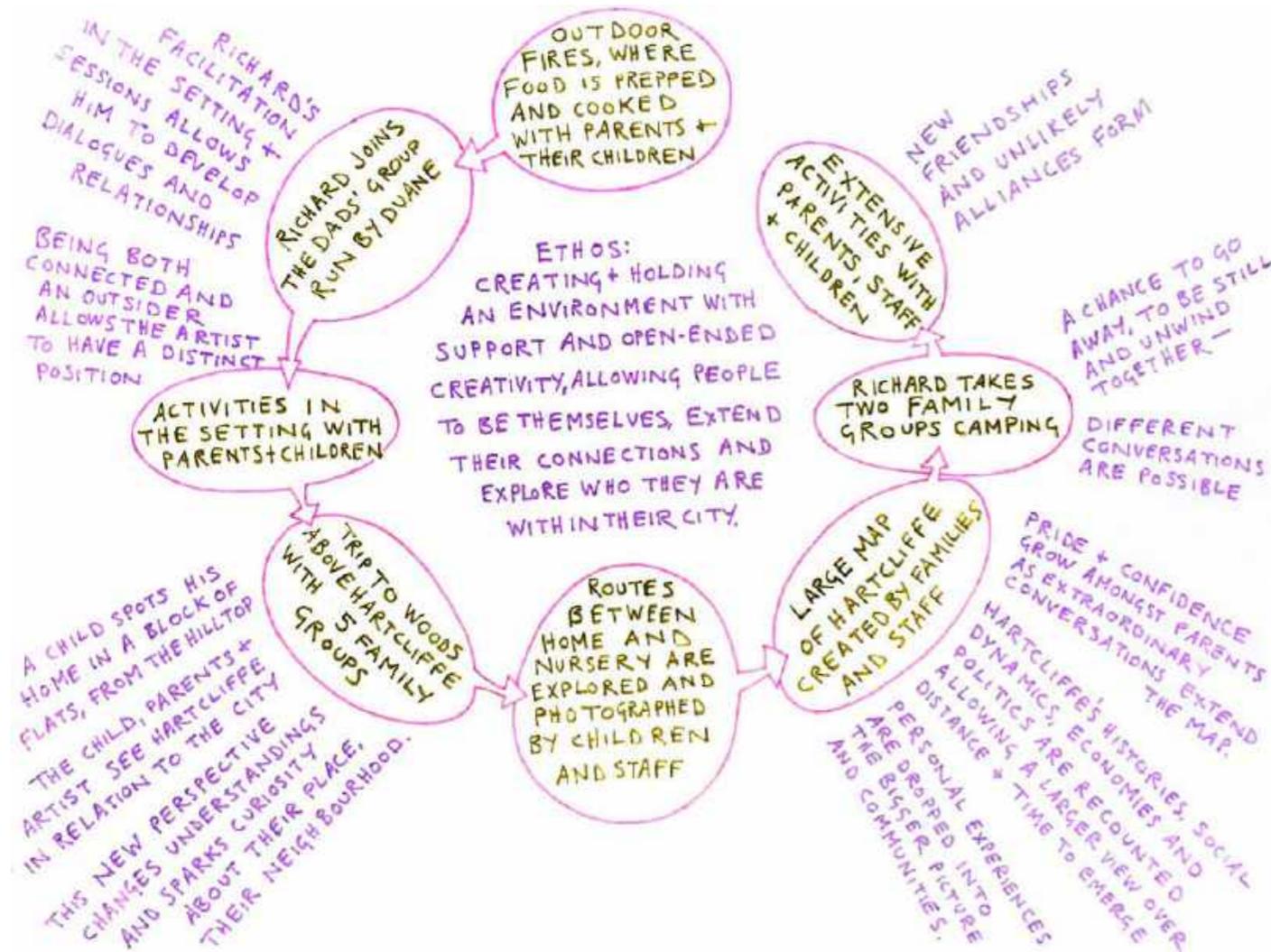
## Hartcliffe Nursery School and Children's Centre

"Hartcliffe Children's Centre has been at the heart of the community for over 40 years. It has grown and developed over the years and we now work with about 250 children in the nursery (2 year olds) and Nursery School (3-4 year olds) and up to another 700 children in the local area.

Hartcliffe is situated in a suburb in the south of Bristol. The main estate was built in the 1950s. One of the main employers was Wills Tobacco Company. There are high levels of unemployment and there has been a focus on improving educational attainment for all children and adults.

There is a strong sense of community and many families have lived here for many years. More families are beginning to move into the area contributing to a more diverse community." (Marie, Head teacher)

Artist Richard Hughes worked with staff and families at Hartcliffe Nursery School and Children's Centre over a period of 2 years. A map depicting the creative process that emerged throughout the project is represented to the left.



## Sharing perspectives

Early in the project, in response to one of the parents talking about growing up in the countryside with family then moving to Hartcliffe and losing his rural connection, Richard organised for a group of families to take a walk through the woods overlooking the local area. As they walked they talked about changes of perspective, the different view of where they lived. From their position in the woods they could see outside their local area and up on the ridge, even across into the next county. One of the boys noticed his flat, which became a point of interest. On the way back they stopped in different places, looking back from different perspectives. This became a significant stimulus for future work.



### Validation and visibility: Making the map

Richard (the artist) walked with two children from their houses, taking in their route to nursery. As they walked they talked about what their route to nursery was like, what their favourite bits were, what it was like coming to nursery. The boys photographed key places along the way. This developed into an ongoing series of activities around mapping, reminiscing, walks, photography, occupying a portacabin for a couple of days and going camping. Two mothers started making a map together. They drew the outskirts of the community and started to fill in the middle.

“It was really interesting to watch another perspective developing. Neither of them were particularly confident at writing, and to start with one of the mums didn’t want to do anything at all, but soon she was grabbing the others hand and saying ‘no, not like that, do it here’. It was a fantastic interaction.” (Richard, artist)

“There was something about getting to know each other. We’ve had that quite a lot in the sessions. We’ve had it a lot where people have started to get to know each other and have been finding out about each other through the process.” (Richard, artist)

### Reflections

Through the shared process of making the map, and experiences such as exploring the woods and sharing food together, parents participating in the project were enabled to explore a different kind of visibility. Sharing their experiences of being part of that community, and physically representing those experiences on the map, supported them to celebrate their own sense of place and family narrative and to make it visible to others via the map. The opportunity to see their own community from a different perspective through the relationship with Rich, as the artist, helped to empower parents in their reflections on their own sense of place and what it felt like to be a member of that community.





**Perspectives: Jumping in puddles**

“We went to the woods and it was horrible weather, very wet.

One of the mums was getting very anxious and concerned about her daughter getting soaking in the puddles.

There was a moment when we stopped and I said to her, ‘she really can’t get any wetter now, she’s completely soaked’.

And it was a fantastic moment, it was like she could suddenly enjoy her daughter jumping in the puddles. And she started talking about how much her daughter

was enjoying it which also helped her to enjoy the walk herself.” (Richard, artist)

**Reflections**

Shifting perspectives has been a theme that has emerged throughout the projects in each setting. The artists’ processes have provided time and space to explore different ways of looking at and appreciating children’s behaviours and learning, such as the example shared here of jumping in puddles. This has been valuable in supporting parents to reflect on the things children do and the potential value of their playful activities and explorations for their learning and development.



**Sense of community**

**Co-creating safe space**

Throughout the project Richard and the centre staff have recognized the importance of time and space, and of things finding their own pace. Giving time in the first instance to meeting people, finding out and building on what is already there (Richard, artist)

The group needed a large space where they could be together all day. The staff arranged for the Portacabin to be available for the group for 2 days to work on the map. The Portacabin attached to the centre offered a level of safety but yet felt separate and distinct – a third space, democratic, co-created.

“Marie [reflecting on the project] was talking about taking the time to work with people, not looking at the end result, being with the person in the place where they’re at and allowing the thing to develop” (Richard, artist).

**Sense of Place themes:**

Being and belonging; Qualities of relationships; Ways of learning; Processes of art; Connecting to home and place; Perspectives; Validation and visibility

**EYFS themes:** Enabling environments; Positive relationships; Unique family; Learning and development



### Being and belonging

Food was a significant part of every session: going to buy the food, cooking and eating it. As they settled into this routine 'it was like a family eating together' (Richard, artist).

The map was a central feature in the story, a shared creation. Richard talked about the importance of what happened around the map. The map became a holder (the aesthetic third): a catalyst that's a bit outside of everyone, whilst being shared and of great significance (Deborah, artist mentor).



Whilst working together connections and trust were being built amongst the group of parents, artist and staff who were involved. Personal stories and confidences were shared across the map: "the map only holds a very small part, a hint of the stories that were shared in the group" (Richard, artist).

"I'm finding it quite hard to do justice to some of the parents because I can show the work and I can show some of the moment, but the bit's that make it really beautiful are the bits I can't say in a way." (Richard, artist)

### Parent's agency

During the project the group invited other members of the centre community to come in and tell their stories. Hayley took on the role of interviewer: "What's your story? How's Hartcliffe changed over the time you've been here?" Natacha (Deputy head teacher) and Chris (family outreach staff member) both commented on how skillful and adept Hayley was in interviewing; they commented that her questions really 'got to the nub' and were surprised by how much they found themselves saying to her about Hartcliffe.

Towards the end of the project Hayley and Richard invited people in to hear the story of the map and the experiences of the group. There was a strong sense of Hayley and some of the other parents taking ownership of the map: 'you're commitment to painting it' (Richard). As the map extended and became more detailed Hayley and another parent had decided to add colour and paint sections of the map. Hayley explained how during one session the children had begun to lose interest after a while and she and another parent had decided to set up water and bubbles in a tray outside for her daughter Millie and friends to play in.

Hayley talked about her memories as a child growing up in Hartcliffe. "There used to be more stuff to do when I was a kid. The kids don't have anything to do now so they get into trouble." Hayley remembered the carnival that everyone used to be involved in. She had talked during the project about maybe doing a carnival again. Richard suggested that they could do it, start small, maybe a procession from the Children's Centre with costumes. Hayley suggested a cake stall for fundraising. Marie (Head Teacher) thought it was a great suggestion. Ideas were shared and discussed for getting a carnival group together (Hayley, other parents, and staff).

### Reflections

The story shows a 'culture of genuine partnership with parents' (Sally Jaeckle, Head of Early Years Services). Feeling safe in a co-created space and the quality of relationships (respectful, trusting, non-judgmental, non-hierarchical between the artist, the families and the centre practitioners) enabled the sharing of personal stories because of the trust that had been built amongst the group. The time and pace of the co-created project enabled parents to take ownership, to have agency, to show their capabilities and creative capacities, their aspirations for themselves and their children and to show their potential as active citizens in their community.

**EYFS themes:** Enabling environments; Positive relationships; Unique family; Learning and development

**Sense of Place themes:** Co-creating safe space; Being and belonging; Qualities of relationships; Parents agency; Time and pace

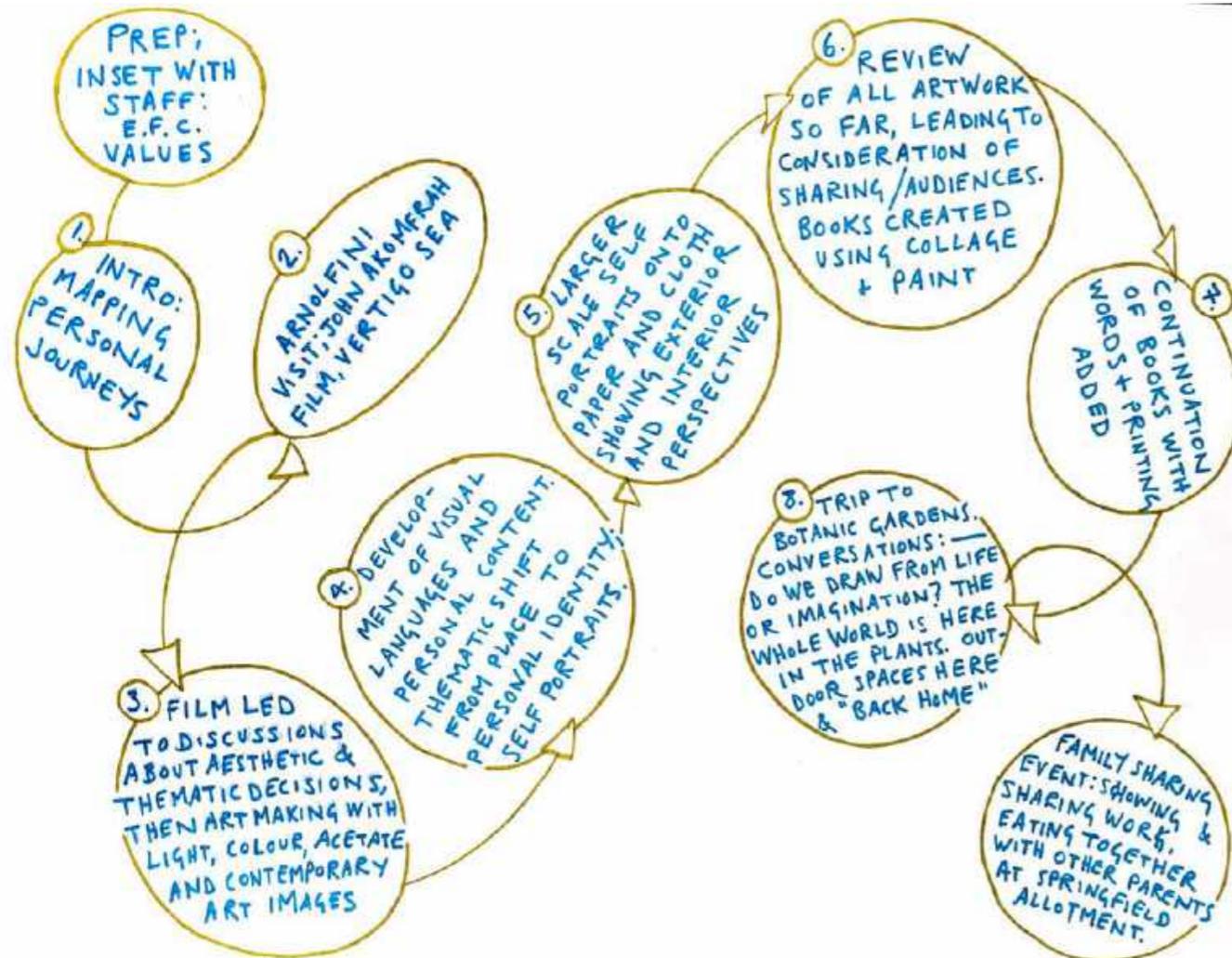
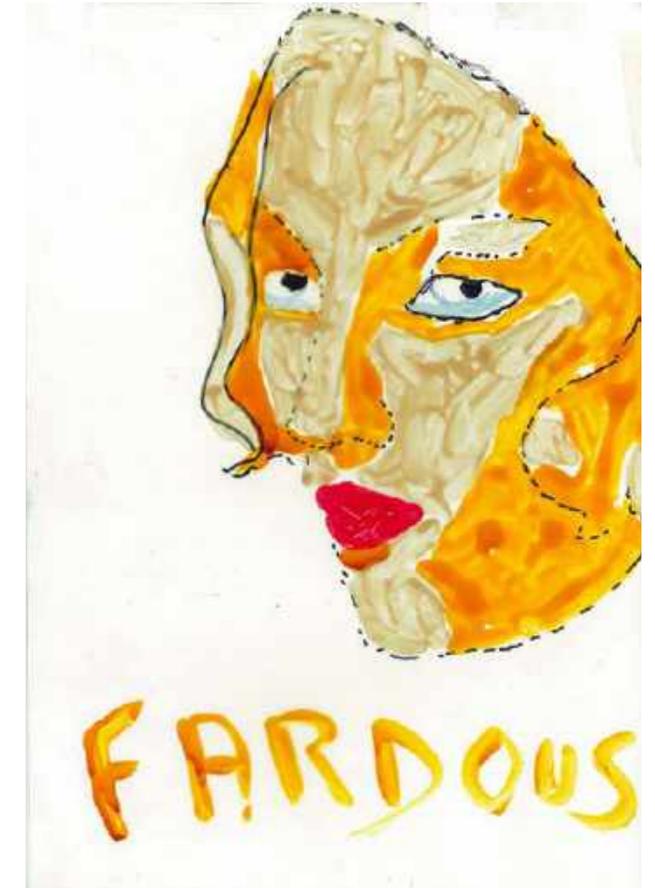
## 6. Introducing Easton

### Easton Families Project and Rosemary Nursery School and Children's Centre

"Easton Families Project serves the local community by supporting families with young children. We aim to narrow the achievement gap and overcome disadvantage through high quality early education, family support, adult education, parenting groups and opportunities for families from diverse communities to integrate together. Easton Families project has been serving the vibrant community of Easton for 16 years.

Our preschool offers 64 children the opportunity to learn through play in a secure and stimulating environment. Our stay and play sessions support parents in playing and learning with their children. Our Arabic women's group, (Sadaka) and international cooking group, (Easton Bread) facilitate integration and combat isolation for local women. Our parenting classes support parents and children build stronger bonds and our adult education programme provides a stepping stone for parents to access work." (Torja, Project Manager)

Artist Kirsty Claxton worked in two settings throughout the project. During the first year she worked with the community in St Judes at Rosemary Nursery School and Children's Centre, before moving to work with Easton Families Centre in the second year. A map depicting Kirsty's creative process within the project is represented to the left.





One woman made camels. "The sense was that she was really competent. It's not about necessarily developing amazing skills but this woman had encountered in herself something that was then validated in the group. Somebody who isn't confident and doesn't feel very visible in the world." (Kirsty, artist)

The group was invited to take the materials home to make with or see what their children made. "So there was this lovely exchange going on with what was happening in the centre and what was happening back in the domestic home." (Kirsty, artist)

#### Art as a way of having a conversation

At Easton Families Project, Kirsty and Marie (Family support) took the families to see *Vertigo Sea*, by John Akomfrah at the Arnolfini in response to conversations about their personal journeys. The group of mothers, children and support staff were welcomed in to the Arnolfini where they were introduced to the film that explored memory, migration, history, and possible futures. "They really enjoyed the film even though it was emotional. They want to go back. They have already been sharing it – showing the exhibition guides to other mums." (Marie, Family support)

This dialogue with places and art within the city has been a continuous thread throughout and the significance of it can be seen in the context of the whole process described in the next story and on the map of the project (above).

At the end of the project with Easton families the group decided to visit Bristol University's Botanic Gardens in response to the groups interest in beauty and colour. They wandered and wondered exploring the familiar and unfamiliar, the textures, colours and smells. They were inspired by a group painting in the hot houses and plan to return.

## Exploring Bristol

### Social and cultural capital

Families from Easton visited several cultural centres across Bristol during the project with artist Kirsty Claxton: "using art as a new way to have a conversation" (Kirsty, artist). Parents from Rosemary Nursery and Children's Centre visited an exhibition at Bristol Museum by Korean artist Doh Ho Suh. His textile, *New York staircase* fitted into a suitcase and triggered conversations: what would you bring from home? The mothers from Sudan, Somalia, Iraq, India, Bangladesh talked about home in Bristol and home back home.

### Ways of Learning: connecting home & place

"One of the things that came up a lot was the desire to bring their mothers back. Some of the women chose to work in clay and started making objects that were of their own country, from their childhood. These were materials this group of women had never worked with before. It was an opportunity to see themselves and each other in quite a different way. Experiencing themselves making things." (Kirsty, artist)



### Home in Bristol

At the families sharing event at Springfields Allotments, Knowle West, Faryaad was amazed at the view of Bristol, another part of the city they hadn't visited before. She wanted to return and bring other families from Easton to it, to see 'their city' from that viewpoint.

### Reflections

"The artist is connecting communities with contemporary culture through their familiarity and experience, bringing their understanding of different cultures in life and in the world and combining this with the experiences of the community." (Deborah, artist mentor) Exploring the wider city promoted connection to it, and a greater sense of being and belonging. The cultural centres became more accessible and inviting. Parents gained new perspectives on their city and became more visible within it. Collaborating together as a group (Family support, artist and families) built deeper connections between home and place.



## Process of making: the story over a few weeks

### Personal journeys

In the first session at Easton Families Project Kirsty provided visual stimuli and invited the mothers to trace their journeys, from the country where they were born to Bristol, onto a world map. Some journeys were convoluted: Somalia via Sweden to Bristol; others had grown up in Coventry.

Hibbo and Fardousa worked with Marie (Family support) drawing and tracing; enabling conversations to happen. "I saw things about them I hadn't seen before. I learnt so much about their stories, how they got here, their journeys, how strange it felt." (Marie, Family Support)

Kirsty supported the women to explore identity "through geography, personal journeys, connections and relationships as they drew and reflected on what they drew". (Deborah, artist mentor)

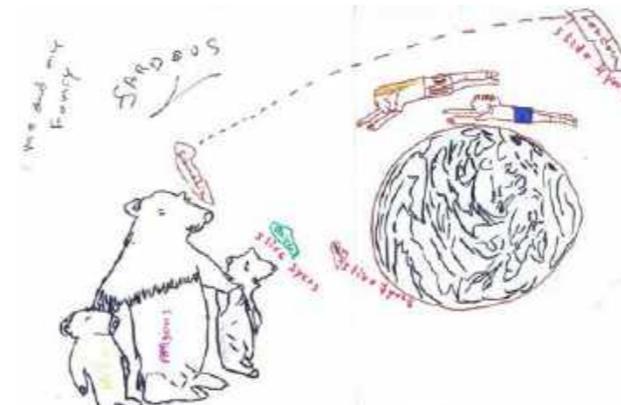
In response to the Arnolfini exhibition (Akomfrah) the mothers were offered a selection of materials including contemporary art magazines with which to make a visual response to the film.

Iram said it was only when she started finding and collecting images that she found what she wanted to say. Her images reminded her of the innocence of childhood, family days out, and she was drawn to the tranquillity of gardens. Fadousa and Faryaad's collage was in contrast: "It is sad. Everything is broken, like war."



The session triggered conversations around beauty, aesthetics and discomfort; how the artist manipulated their responses through colour and music. Some thought the film too beautiful, not hard hitting enough. The women made and discussed their choices and intentions in selecting images, colours, symbols and the emotions they were conveying.

Following on from their sharing of personal journeys, what they valued and what affected them emotionally, Kirsty proposed that they begin to look at identity. There was "a conversation about whether drawing themselves would be permissible and comfortable ... Faryaad said it wasn't something which, strictly speaking a Moslem should do, however she was curious and felt the value of it in this situation." (Kirsty, artist)



Most of the women hadn't drawn before. They were at ease with sharing images of themselves via their phones and they used these to begin making self-portraits, some painting with glass paints on acetate.



### Exploring identity through making

“Sharing their selfies, and images of themselves in the home (outside of public visibility), led to conversations about how they are perceived in comparison to how they actually are ‘on the inside’.” (Kirsty, artist)

“The mothers were now at ease with the materials, processes and themes of art-making. There began to be a sense of autonomy, of self-direction. The women took on their own work, continuing and extending it in an undirected way. The sessions could be quite noisy and raucous, then descend into silence as the women got engrossed.” (Deborah, artist mentor and Kirsty, artist)

The group documented their work, photographing it, making collages and books. They took blank books home for their children to draw in. The group explored through drawing, painting and sewing materials: how do I see myself; how do my communities see me; how do my children see me; how do I want to be seen; what’s actually on the inside? “They had talked about sewing, about veils and layers ... they wrote on cloth, filling them and exploring all sorts of metaphors.” (Kirsty, artist)

Iram, who had studied art at school and had been to university in the UK, talked about how these sessions took her back to that feeling. “These art sessions allowed her to return to that sense of who she wanted to be. She was very engaged with art as a tool for self-expression, started to make suggestions for the sessions, and described her interior processes of emergence.” (Kirsty, artist)

Others in the group talked about how they had never done anything like this before. “Ubah proclaimed she couldn’t draw and then was unstoppable. She talked excitedly about now being able to support her son in his writing practice. She described the parallel between what he was doing in school with writing and what she was doing in the art sessions; how it was both enjoyable and hard work.” (Kirsty, artist)

“It’s a way of enabling the parents to have a voice, a creative outlet for families to share what is important to them.” (Fiona, Nursery Manager)

### Reflections

Easton Family Project team and the artist worked in collaboration to create a safe space and brought together their complementary perspectives and practices. Kirsty used contemporary art as a way of having a new conversation with the families. In this enabling environment the mothers revealed their interests and through the materials and processes were able to explore issues of import to them. They thoughtfully engaged in experiential and open-ended ways of learning, took risks, and tried new things. They became visible to themselves and each other through making, drawing, and painting. Staff, artist and parents worked side by side, empowering each other, and meaning-making together. The women made choices, developed a sense of their own creativity, gained agency and saw connections to their children’s learning.

**Sense of Place themes:** Co-creating safe space; Being and belonging; Processes of Art; Qualities of relationships; Validation and visibility; Ways of Learning

**EYFS key themes:** Enabling environments; Positive relationships; Learning & development; Unique child – unique families

# 7. Letting ideas emerge

## Letting ideas emerge

The power and challenge of engaging with families in open-ended experiences was recognised as important across all settings. The following stories represent experiences across the project, reflecting the theme of the generative potential of not knowing.

A key feature of the work in each setting was the unplanned and unpredictable nature of the projects. In each case the artists began with a provocation, such as a visit to a local cultural centre or a walk through the local community. What happened next was allowed to unfold in response to the interests and experiences of the families, supported by the educators and artists. This way of working, using the unpredictable nature of the artists' creative processes, was enabled by the strong and trusting relationships built within the groups in each setting.

## Generative potential of not knowing

In each setting there have been reflections on participants' experience of the unknown.

In Hartcliffe, Hayley (parent) recounted the story of the project and how the map had evolved explaining their processes as a group of parents and staff, facilitated by Richard as the artist.

Hayley recalled how their first session was one of meeting and talking with each other whilst making food. 'We weren't really doing anything. We didn't start with the idea of making a map.' She described how the group seemed to be OK with an open starting point to the project, and how much value there had been in letting something come out of their shared experiences and discussions together.



## Reflections

Throughout the project, educators and families talked about their experience of working in this space of uncertainty and how different it was to their usual experiences within the centres. Often, they described how their initial feeling of unease at not being told what to do had changed as they worked alongside the artists, eventually coming to see this open ended process as empowering. A key part of the artists' role in each setting therefore, was holding this space of uncertainty, providing the tools and skills to support those involved in finding their path within it.

In Knowle West, Edwina (artist) and Janet (parent) reflected on their experience of the project and the relationships within it.

'We were all on the same level. It was really special. It was really exciting not knowing what was going to happen, we all worked it out together. Families doing something together.' (Janet, parent)

Janet and Edwina talked about the 'bond' that developed between everyone in the project.

'It's important to feel part of something bigger.' (Edwina, artist)

'The achievement of it too was really important.' (Janet, parent)

'Watching the film for the first time was amazing – a feeling I can't put into words.' (Janet, parent)

'I've been to lots of things [as a parent] but I've not experienced anything like this. This is really special. There's no pressure. There's families that will come to this that wouldn't come to other things.' (Janet, parent)

## 8. Educators' reflections

We asked if it made a difference working with an artist?

Janet: You always [to Edwina] put a blank canvas but also so many materials that inspire us. I was nervous one session. Aaliyah started doing something and then I just got stuck in.'

Throughout the project there were many reflections on the value of 'not knowing'.

"Lots of artists use that as their practice – that is what their practice is, not knowing, and process is absolutely everything. The power of not knowing is liberating so that you can actually follow the work in the same way that we can follow the children and create relationships – it's very, very powerful not knowing – it's a strong starting point." (Edwina, artist)

"I was thinking about the empowering nature of the process. If I think back on our initial meetings with the parents, I think they very much expected that we were going to tell them what the film was going to be, that we were going to tell them what we wanted them to do, and when we didn't, it was almost a strange sort of dynamic for a while, a little bit of uncertainty and unsureness amongst us. But actually, holding onto that feeling of being a little bit uneasy about it has actually empowered the result to be what it is." (Rachel, educator)

**EYFS themes:** Enabling environments; Positive relationships; Unique family; Learning and development

**Sense of Place themes:** Co-creating safe space; Being and belonging; Qualities of relationships; Parents agency; Time and pace; Generative potential of not knowing



### Reflecting on the project

Towards the end of Sense of Place, educators were encouraged to reflect, in conversation with the artist and mentors, on the effects of the project on their settings, communities and professional practices. These reflections were explored in relation to 4 key areas: Relationships; Social and cultural capital; Love of learning; and the Legacy of the project.

### Relationships

The educators in each setting considered what had emerged for them in terms of different aspects of relationships: *how had involvement in this research, through working alongside artists, had an effect on the qualities of relationships between children, parents and staff?*

At Knowle West Children's Centre, Sarah (Head Teacher) talked about the relationships with parents: "We're a centre that truly respects and values parents, we would never perceive ourselves in a hierarchy ... It feels like this project has enabled those values to become much more real."

Natacha (Deputy Head Teacher at Hartcliffe Children's Centre) talked about collaboration with an artist and the influence of this on families and on them as a setting: "Rich (artist) did a lot of research on the local area, that struck a chord with people, staff and parents, looking at the community in a wider sense, because of Rich's perspective ... There was real pride, looking at their place. This is where our community comes from."

"We've worked in the world of outcomes, measurement, justification and money spent. What was really positive about Rich was that he was able to support an open-ended and safe space which offers a positive time with children and their families. We, Marie (Head Teacher) and I, really valued that."

At Easton Families Project, Marie (Family Support) reflected on the quality of relationships built during the project between the community of mothers and also between herself and the parents:

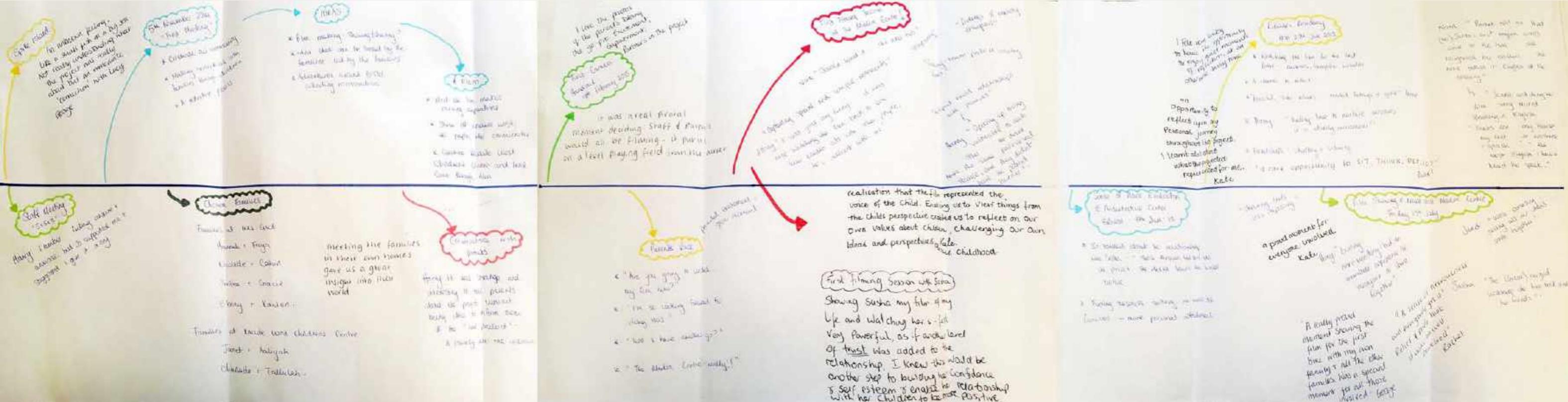
"I think between them as parents their relationships have got stronger. They've already got quite good friendships, but they've bonded over the projects as well, and they've also been inclusive. One parent is normally in the corner on her own – but she's got really involved in discussions and the other ladies have made her feel welcome even though she's the quieter one out of all of them. She's been really engaged in it."

"For me I've learnt a lot about their journeys in other areas that I hadn't already ... We knew their journey but not in that detail. I think that has been helpful in making things a lot closer and they've learnt about me and my journey, and your two journeys. So it's not been like a student-teacher role it's a level playing field ... I've done some follow up visits from conversations we've had in group sessions that they want help with. So it's great that they are happy to see me as participant but also available to still do the other bits that we do."

### Social and cultural capital

The settings considered: *In what ways access to different creative experiences had enabled families to feel empowered, build social and cultural capital and celebrate their identity, community and sense of place?*

At Knowle West Children's Centre, George (Room Leader) reflected on the families journey across the project and of their sense of pride in their community: "At the beginning they wouldn't have thought they would be able to do this (share with other families and communities) – the project has allowed them to get to a point where they can do that ... That's where Lucy (artist)



has been important, in suggesting the film as a way of sharing and celebrating, recognising that a street in Knowle West does not look like a street in Clifton."

'It has had an impact outside of the project as well – parents are going on to do their own training, level 2 training – because of the shared ethos that was established, all of these factors have added up.' (Matt, Learning Co-ordinator)

Natacha, Deputy Head at Hartcliffe Children's Centre talked about the importance of the parents feeling that they have a voice in a different context: 'The strength of the project is in the close partnership between the Children's Centre and Rich, a lot of it felt like we were trying to find a way of working which built on aspects of both of our practices.'

Rich: Because I had come in new to the Centre, I was able to stand on the edge and was not bound in the way everything goes and people's perceptions of officialdom. It also meant that there was an enthusiasm for it to happen because it was new and different. It helped in many ways e.g. with Duane because I was new and he was excited by the project.

In Easton the parents expressed and celebrated their and each others identity: "When we did the drawings around each other – *what did other people think of us, what did we think of ourselves* and then we all ended up writing on each others as well as our own. It was quite empowering and we all enjoyed writing on each others' what we thought of them: like good parent, good mum, good friend. I think that week they all went out thinking I've seen something about myself I wouldn't have thought." (Marie, Family Support)

**Love of learning**

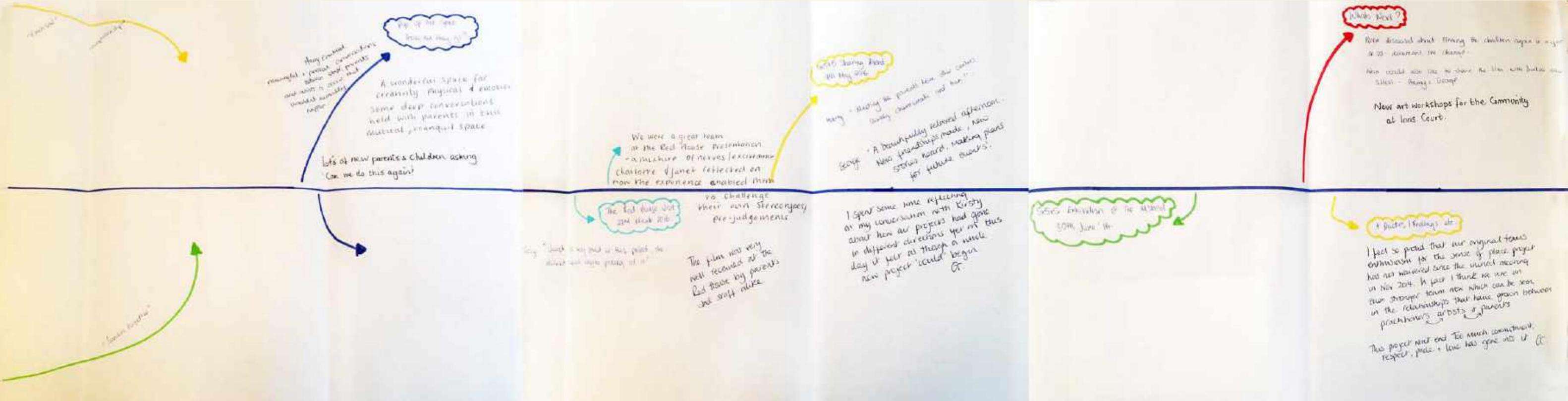
The educators reflected on: *the influence on families of working with artists to explore and express their own creativity and love of learning?*

At Knowle West Children's Centre the educators made the link with the centres' ethos of research and the influence of the project on the parents seeing themselves as researchers in their children's learning: "It links in with our research – encouraging parents to document their children's learning. It almost melts your heart to know the parent wants to be really involved and to see their level of involvement increasing." (Harry, Family Support)

"It's not a separate thing, we don't do learning and then stop. The process of working with the project mirrors what we're talking about with a child at play, it's not playing and then learning." (Matt, Learning Co-ordinator)

Natacha, Deputy Head of Hartcliffe Children's Centre, reflected on parents engagement in an open-ended process and it's challenges: "We have struggled in the past with something open-ended and had concerns at the beginning ... but all credit to Rich for making it safe and contained and supported. The families are happier to engage with more open-ended things now. One of the mums now volunteers in one of the rooms, she brings in lots of things and has more confidence. I don't think she would have done this without the work with Rich. She comes to me with ideas, has started to think outside the box and is trying things out." (Natacha, Deputy Head)

At the Easton Families Project, Marie (Family support) talked about the importance to the parents of being given the time, space and attention throughout the project for their own love of learning: "Iram has been really engaged in it. It's something she's really wanted to do."



### Legacy of the project

Each setting also considered *what had come out of the project for them? What it's influence had been on practice?*

#### Knowle West Children's Centre and Inn's Court

For Harry (Family Support): "Looking back it's good it was open ended because I was able to experience new pathways of learning, experiencing opportunities in different ways, participating in something and being able to reflect. That's professional development – learning about our own well-being and self-being – we wouldn't have learnt as much or reflected as much without doing the project. It's enabled you to reflect."

For Sarah (Head Teacher): "The benefits have been huge in terms of how it's increased our body of knowledge, the relationships, the research we're going into this year and moving forward. It has informed so many different things – what we've learned from this project will influence what we do."

"We've understood more, trying to explore relationships between parent and key person, we've understood it in greater depth, the power balance. We started off thinking it was about relationships, at the heart of our practice is equal partnerships but the power balance is not quite right. It has informed us in how you build those relationships, how you take them to another level and build agency ... It has provoked us to look again at this relationship and the understanding of each other's roles in a lot more depth. It has enabled us to think about what is the role of creativity and creative experience, working with artists bringing different perspectives and provoking thinking."

#### Hartcliffe Children's Centre

"It's been a real learning point for us as a team, a refreshing way of approaching things (not measuring)." (Natacha, Deputy Head)

Natacha also talked about the confidence and trust in a different way of *being with* parents: "It's something we were working on already but having Rich here to actually do it gives us that confidence... We thought carefully about ways to best engage families. We wondered if an open-ended project would mean that participants would wonder what they were doing – but looking back they've all had their own individual journeys." (Natacha, Deputy Head)

#### Easton Families Project

Marie (Family Support) reflected on the project and the potential of extending this work with the families in the future. "If we'd done it ourselves we wouldn't have thought lets do an arts project and see how that works but the benefits of it have been really great. Now we're going to see what we can do and how we can run it again to give more opportunities in the way that these 5/6 women have had."

In the sessions with the artist the children had been fascinated to see what their mothers were doing. Marie is interested in the influence on the children of seeing their parents exploring and expressing themselves creatively: "It would be nice for their children to see them explore". Also "If we can encourage parents to do more work with the children, whether it's drawing or maths, it's always positive, it'll extend the children's learning opportunities."

## 9. Acknowledgements

Thanks to all the families involved in the research, educators, artists, cultural centres and colleagues from Bristol Early Years team.

Special thanks to Professor Iram Siraj for your inspiration as Patron of 5x5x5=creativity

5x5x5=creativity research team  
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Katherine Evans, Researcher  
Liz Elders, Mentor  
Deborah Aguirre Jones, Artist

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"The Sense Place Research Project is a significant piece of work. I particularly like the focus on involving everyone in the research process, making it active and creative, using parents' and children's ideas, offering a sense of belonging and connectedness - these we need more so now than ever! There is a genuine respect for what children and parents bring, but most of all the research shows how educators can be reflective researchers working together in a creative and democratic way, ultimately making a difference to young children and their families."

Professor Iram Siraj OBE, Patron of 5x5x5=creativity

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