Our Vision

We believe all children have the right to be understood as individuals and need time and opportunity to develop as creative, competent learners in an inspiring environment, with lots of access to the outdoors. We also believe children are part of society, and have the right to make many connections, with each other and with the adults around them. Our vision is to create a school that values caring, respectful relationships and makes heard the voices of children in all aspects of their education.

Our Image of the child

Our approach to curriculum begins with our image of the child. We see children as:
- Rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent
- Confident in building relationships, having values and respect for others
- Having a curiosity and open-mindedness to ideas and explorations of all kinds
- Capable of independent, critical, divergent thinking

This strong image of the child is something we hold as a group of educators; it shapes our expectations of children and means we work with an emergent rather than fixed curriculum, through projects which cross traditional ‘subject’ areas.

Projects can develop from children’s own interests and from educators’ research questions. Children and educators develop projects together, each learning during the process, and in this respect our emergent curriculum is also co-constructed.
Reflections Educational Approach

Background & Influences
At Relections Small School we draw inspiration from the world-renowned educational approach in Reggio Emilia, Northern Italy. This is not a methodology, but a philosophy, pedagogy and practice, developed across the city over the last 70 years in infant-toddler centres (0-3 years), pre-schools (3-6 years) and more recently a Primary School (6-13 years). From the approach in Reggio Emilia we have drawn the following:

- The image of the child as strong, powerful, competent and capable
- Project-based learning with philosophical depth and detailed complexity
- A belief in the value of children’s own fascinations, theories and understandings
- A shared practice of supporting these by capable, experienced, thoughtful educators
- The inclusion of artists (Atelieristas) to support children’s creative development
- Environments and spaces which support investigation and exploration
- A wide range and scale of open-ended resources
- Giving children time, to develop depth and individual readiness in learning
- A recognition of the many ‘expressive languages’ of children and the connections between them
- The importance of developing these languages in educators too — making opportunities for staff to explore drawing, sculpture, movement, engineering etc.
- Documentation as a process of sharing understandings and respecting children, as well as a fundamental part of planning and developing curriculum

We have also drawn much inspiration from Danish nature kindergartens which support children’s independence and include regular year-round access to rich outdoor environments, especially woodland. We offer weekly Forest School and Beach School sessions to all our school children.

We recognise the significant value of international theorists including Bruner, Dewey, Montessori, Vygotsky, Piaget and educators in the UK, including Susan Isaacs and Margaret & Rachel Macmillan. Continued Professional Development both internally and through conferences/training/study weeks keeps our interaction with theory alive in our practice.

We have also worked with Philosophy for Children (P4C) to deepen our interpretation of children’s behaviour and enhance the quality of our questions to children in order to better support their learning.

These inspirations and much internal discussion reflecting on our own practice, enable us to offer an education which meets the requirements of the Department for Education and expresses our own strong beliefs and values.
Working with an Emergent Curriculum

Emergent curriculum is a way of teaching and planning curriculum in response to children’s deep interests and enquiries, educators’ research questions, carefully considered physical environments and the dynamics of social relationships. It is an approach to curriculum-building that can be developed at any stage of education, and prioritises active learning, independence, collaboration, long-term enquiries and creative expression.


At the centre of our approach are children’s ideas and interests. We begin working with any group of children by listening carefully for their fascinations, and finding ways to develop these.

Our curriculum emerges from a repeated cycle of offering spaces, materials and ideas for children to explore; listening to the many ways in which they engage with these; taking time as a group of educators to compare our observations, recognising subjectivity and comparing perspectives; reflecting on the ‘big ideas’ and connections that might be driving children’s explorations; deciding how/when/where/with which materials we can deepen the children’s enquiries; making further observations.
Curriculum

Reflections has ten years’ experience of working with children’s thinking. We know children are deeply interested in concepts that have always engaged human minds and continue to do so - life, death, change, identity, real worlds, imagined worlds, beauty, danger, bravery... Our emergent curriculum looks for and works with the big ideas that underlie what children say, draw, build, illustrate, count, dramatize, put into words.

Project work is cross-curricular, and we have weekly meetings to discuss what aspects of children’s learning are being supported at any time. A single project is likely to have periods in which language development and communication is key, or detailed design and engineering work, or mathematical calculation and analysis, or technological research and recording. A number of projects will develop over the course of a year, so that children’s learning is broad as well deep.

In Reflections Nursery & Forest School we work with the Early Years Foundation Stage and draw out of each project the children’s learning and development. In the Small School our approach is similar. As projects grow, weekly planning meetings track the learning and involvement of each child, and at regular intervals we assess their developing powers of language, literacy, logic, mathematics, scientific observation and prediction, creative invention and expression. We also examine the learning group and its social and emotional dynamics, including the roles each child plays. We support children’s strengths and new ways of learning, and we build opportunities for children to work with each other’s particular talents too, so that collaborative projects recognise individual skills and innovations.

We include a project example here from the Nursery in 2014, as it exemplifies the Reflections approach to building curriculum. The project was developed by four year old children in their final year of nursery, and ages are given in years:months. Reproduced here are summary documentation panels which we use to archive and share children’s projects across the nursery and school.

Project: ‘This is what it looks like to think...’
A four year olds’ project about identity, thinking and physiology

Children’s languages of expression: philosophical argument, physical thinking, sculpture, observational drawing, large scale projection, large and small scale drawing, hypothesis testing, engineering, visual imagination

Areas of EYFS addressed: communication and language; physical development; personal, social and emotional development; mathematics; understanding the world; expressive arts and design
Beginning with a question: what makes me, me?

In 2013/14, as part of a nursery-wide focus on sculpture, Pre-school 2 children became particularly interested in exploring their own faces with mirrors and photographs, and made representations of themselves in line drawings and clay. They looked closely at each other too, noting similarities and differences. The question of individual identity arose from these explorations:

‘I’ve got straight hair, look, so straight and long’  
‘look, I’ve got a chin’  
‘we have the same eyes and the same birthday, but we are not the same person, are we Lily?’  
‘this is me, big strong Seb’  
‘it’s me, rock and roll boy’

Initial observations focussed largely on physical identity, but when the children gave titles to their sculptures and talked about them, other inner qualities were recognised:

Who we are on the inside, and what we look like on the outside had both been linked to identity. We decided to examine these aspects of individuality further through structured discussion, observational and interpretive drawing, and sculpture.

Looking inside the outside

Each morning children a group of four year olds engaged in philosophical enquiry. Some difficult questions were posed:

‘your brain actually...’cos you can think about things in your brain’  
‘you used to be babies and now you are much bigger, are you still the same person? If two children have the same name and the same hair colour, are they the same? What can and what can’t change about myself for me still to be me? What is it that makes me, me?’

To this last question Ben replied:

Other children agreed that the brain was significant and seemed intrigued to describe and define this important part of themselves that they couldn’t see. They returned to their expressive languages of drawing and clay sculpture, making models of the brain and its internal connections. A very large image of the brain was projected onto a blank wall covered in paper. It was big enough to get inside and journey around.
Queenie noticed that the brain was ‘squiggly’ and suggested using wire to make a model. Small wire sculptures were constructed by individual children, and then connected together to make a huge collaborative sculpture of the brain.

As the children worked they offered more detailed theories about the brain. Their proposals, like their drawings and sculptures, grew in complexity and connection, as they used each other’s ideas to refine, question and confirm their own.

What is the brain for?

‘It’s for thinking’ Ben (4:2)
‘Actually, it’s for listening’ Beth (4:0)
‘If you didn’t have a brain you couldn’t talk’ finest (4:2)
‘If you talk, you have your brain there to think’ Henry (4:3)
‘When you talk your brain makes it come out of your mouth’ Sab (4:5)

You have spoken a lot about the brain being used for thinking. What is thinking?

‘Ideas and talk’ Finley (4:1)
‘I think it’s to think about funny things’ Ben (4:2)
‘It means when you think about sculpture’ Finley (4:3)
‘Thoughts are when you are not writing or doing anything, you are just being super quiet’ Finley (4:3)
‘I think it means good answers come out of your body’ Maria (4:7)

What is our brain like?

‘Stringy, a bit like an octopus’ Ben (4:1)
‘It’s just everywhere in our head and talks to you’ Sam (4:5)
‘Your brain goes all around your body just like blood’ Neil (4:2)

Where are thoughts before they come out of your body?

‘They live in your head or somewhere far away’ Ben (4:2)
‘If you die though, you don’t have thoughts or a beating heart’ Finley (4:1)
‘They live in your skeleton’ Ben (4:5)
‘They live everywhere, in every part of your body’ Neil (4:2)
We could use torches to see in our brain’ Ronnie (4:6)

In their discussions about thinking, several children pointed out that ‘we can’t really see our brains’, but they also clearly described experiences of seeing and hearing their own thoughts:

‘I can see my thoughts if I listen to them. Something in my brain tells me my thoughts’ Queenie (4:6)

‘They look like technology, they exit your brain’ Ben (4:2)

‘Like, if you think about riding a bike, it would look like you riding a bike’ Leila (4:6)

‘You might not see what you think about because it’s inside your brain’ Maria (4:7)

Ronnie, like many of the children, was fascinated by the idea of visible and invisible thinking. He suggested using torches to help see into the brain. Lenses and magnifying glasses were also offered, and the children spent a long time looking through each other’s eyes, mouths and foreheads. They reported their findings:

‘I can see technology in Queenie’s brain’ Ben (4:2)

“What does technology look like when you see it in Queenie’s brain, Ben?” Renki (4:2)

“It looks like squiggles” Ben (4:2)

“I can see memories in Leila’s brain and they looked like shapes” Maria (4:7)

Leila drew a diagram of Maria’s memories, and used her lens to examine the images more closely. She could see the time Maria went to Disneyland, a map of the park.

Physical thinking: making connections visible →

The children had talked about how things are connected inside the brain — ideas and memories, pictures and sounds, hearing and thinking — but they were also interested in exploring the brain’s relationship with other parts of the body. New connections began to appear in their sculptures, many now attached to the external surface of the brain. Tubes, connection and flow all became significant.

‘The tubes that make us talk can make us breathe too’ Ben (4:6)

‘Blood goes through the tubes’ Edie (4:5)

‘Your veins go all the way from your heart to your brain’ Queenie (4:7)

‘Brain and heart are together’ Ronnie (4:2)

‘There is a special tube from your heart to your brain and it’s for sharing memories’ Leila (4:8)

Finley added cable and cardboard tubes to his clay brain, and poured water into them. He explained what he was doing:

‘This wire is the tube for thinking. This is what happens in my brain. It is how I talk and tell my mum and dad when I am ready for bed’ Finley (4:3)

To develop this understanding of thinking as flow, and to enable the children’s theories about connections in the body to be tested, large tubes of different lengths and textures were placed in the garden.

The group made ‘blood’ from water and red paint, and the scale of their experiments grew to massive proportions. The connections between the children, their shared ideas, adaptations, and ambitions, were made dramatically visible, as they worked for the whole afternoon, creating a giant system to make blood flow.
‘Big Ideas’ in the Curriculum- Continued…

Reflections Small School pedagogy and practice grows directly from our nursery experience, but we would expect and plan for specific differences in developing the detail of the school curriculum:

- As children get older their independent research and work will become more established and confident
- We anticipate a greater capacity in older children to take on and explore others’ ideas in collaboration
- We would also expect to see more detail in any exploration and refinement in creative and practical skills.
- Children would have greater responsibility for documenting their project work through notes, photographs, films, and diaries.
- Children would develop an ability to evaluate their own learning, re-visiting and refining ideas and explorations

Why a ‘Small’ School?

We think that scale is important in learning communities and whilst Reflections is a large setting the children all learn in small groups. We believe that for school-aged children learning groups also work better on a smaller scale. We offer three year groups – Year R, Year 1 and Year 2 and each year groups is divided into Learning Groups of between 8 and 16 children. We offer differentiated learning within the group based on age and readiness.

Smaller scale learning groups offer us the opportunity to know and value the children exceptionally well. This knowledge forms one of the strongest bases for developing curriculum. Small schools have a strong relationship with ‘human-scale’ education theory and practice. For more information, please see here.  http://www.hse.org.uk/about_hse.html

Reflections Small School in action

At Reflections Small School we create a flexible working plan in advance of each session, based on observations from the previous sessions. At the beginning of the year we decide what aspects of children’s interests from their final year in nursery could be carried through to the school and how to offer these alongside important new ideas, materials, and environments.

Across the day, week and year, there is a combination of adult-initiated and adult-led, child-initiated and child-led explorations.

Any short-term plans are flexible within the session and adapted by skilled educators as the depth of children’s engagement emerges. Children are supported to notice each other’s work and re-visit and refine their own.
Educators are given time each week to share their observations of the children and to discuss where they intend to take these experiences next, as well as how the environment can support the children’s learning.

Educators ensure our approach allows each individual child the opportunity to progress towards appropriate milestones, as described in our Assessment Policy.

**A Typical Week at Reflections Small School**

In a typical week at Reflections Small School children will attend the School premises on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays where they have access to our Small School classroom, a Meeting Room, our Research Room – and our gardens.

On Thursdays children will attend Forest School in our local woodland. And on Fridays children have a Yoga session then work in the garden caring for our crops and chickens, make their own lunch and attend Beach School in the afternoon.

The school day will run from 9.00am until 3.30pm and follows the West Sussex Academic Timetable. We also offer parents wraparound care before and after school, if required.
A Typical Day at Reflections Small School – Year R & Year 1

Morning
Children arrive in advance of our start time and spaces and materials are ready for them to engage with. Any time before 9.00am is usually a time for meeting and greeting, catching up with news and sharing ideas and information.

9.00am Our morning meeting commences and lasts as long as it needs to. The purpose of the meeting is to decide plans for the day, based on ongoing work and interests, through a conversation between children and adults.

9.30 - 10.30
During our first session of the morning we have planned, focussed explorations which follow the discussion from the morning meeting and previous sessions. Project work is initiated and developed in these sessions.

For any younger children in the Learning Group, who are not yet school age, there are other experiences on offer from our continuous provision including free play, sand and water play outdoors, construction, etc.

10.30 – 11.00 Snack & Garden

11.00 – 12.45
During our second session of the morning we continue planned, focussed experiences extending the children’s interests and explorations from the first session. At the end of the morning we have a review meeting in which children share and show some of their morning’s work and ideas, and discuss with each other and with the educators what might happen next in their project.

12.45 – 1.45 Lunch (Indoors or Outdoors)
Children help set and decorate the tables and serve each other lunch. Polite table manners, ‘please/ thank you’ are encouraged. Children are encouraged to try all the food provided but we do not force them. We find that where food is tasty and appetisingly presented children will eat most things.

1.45 – 3.30pm
After lunch we offer free play indoors and outdoors or the opportunity to continue any investigations or work form the morning. Children may choose to play with a range of materials and equipment, spanning creative arts, construction, physical explorations and social games.

At the end of each day parents are given a brief verbal account of their child's day at school, including how their child has contributed to a developing project. Any messages are passed on and any parental queries answered.