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Through a different lens: exploring Reggio Emilia in a Welsh context

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In Wales, concerns about the perceived over-formalisation of young children's educational experiences led to the introduction of a Foundation Phase Framework for children aged three to seven years that advocates a more holistic, play-based approach. Following the staging of the Reggio Emilia travelling exhibition, funding was secured for a project in which teachers explored Reggio philosophy and practices as a means of gaining insight into their thinking and pedagogy. Given the introduction of the Foundation Phase, the project also intended to support teachers' explorations of child-led learning. Looking at their practice 'through another lens' exposed teachers' commitment to an approach dominated by prescribed, subject-related outcomes. This approach influenced the way in which the teachers interpreted key aspects of Reggio philosophy and contributed to their difficulties with 'supporting' child-led learning. The paper concludes that moving away from a 'subject-centred' approach, particularly when the Framework includes prescribed learning outcomes, may be extremely challenging for teachers.

Keywords: Foundation Phase; Reggio Emilia; child-led learning; learning outcomes

Introduction

Following devolution, the Welsh Assembly Government has appeared eager to address the perceived over-formalisation of children's early educational experiences (WAG 2003). Drawing on evidence from Australia, New Zealand and from across Europe (including Reggio Emilia in Italy), the Government set out proposals for a Foundation Phase for children aged three to seven years. The Foundation Phase framework advocates a holistic, experiential and play-based approach to children's learning, with a balance of teacher-led and child-initiated activities (WAG 2008); that is, there is a specific requirement that practitioners allow time for, and find ways of supporting, child-led learning.

In September 2005 the travelling Reggio Emilia Exhibition 'The Hundred Languages of Children' was based at Swansea University. Following the staging of this exhibition the organisers were eager to support early years teachers in their desire to engage further with Reggio philosophy and to explore Reggio-inspired approaches in their classrooms. The main aim of this project, then, was to encourage teachers to use Reggio as a 'different lens' in order to gain a greater understanding of their own professional practice. However, recognising the challenges that might be posed by the

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introduction of the proposed Foundation Phase, a further aim was to support teachers' explorations of child-led learning. This paper presents and discusses the main findings of this study.

Education policy in England and Wales

The early years tradition, drawing on theories proposed by pioneers such as Rousseau, Froebel, Montessori and Dewey, upholds the centrality of 'child-centred', progressive education, which, in broad terms, sees the child as intrinsically curious and capable; values free play and first-hand learning which both stems from individual children's interests and cuts across subject boundaries; and views the teacher as a guide and facilitator (Kwon 2002). While the term 'child-centred' has, over time, been appropriated by different groups of people who have shifted the definition to suit their own interests (Chung and Walsh 2000), within statutory education in the UK, child-centred approaches reached the peak of official acceptance in the late 1960s in the Plowden Report, which stated 'At the heart of the educational process lies the child' (CACE 1967, para. 9). It is questionable how far child-centred approaches – as opposed to the discourse of child-centred ideology – were actually implemented in primary classrooms at the time (Galton et al. 1980; Bennett et al. 1984), although it appears that along with the more direct teaching of basic skills there was, as Plowden suggested (CACE 1967, para. 535), an attempt to integrate some subjects into teacher-planned themes or topics. Nevertheless, child-centred ideology was extensively criticised in the 1970s and 1980s by those who claimed that subjects had been devalued within the curriculum (e.g. Alexander 1984).

Concerns about child-centred approaches were reflected in the establishment of a National Curriculum and Assessment system for children of five to 16 years in England and Wales (Education Reform Act 1988). This initiative, paralleled in many other countries with well-developed systems of compulsory education, set out to raise standards within a global marketplace (Soler and Miller 2003), essentially through putting 'subjects' rather than the 'child' at the centre of the curriculum (Alexander et al. 1992). This was seen to have consequences for the role of the teacher (reframed as instructor) and for pedagogy (refocused on whole-class teaching).

Following devolution in 1999, the Welsh Assembly Government raised concerns that primary school teachers were introducing formal, sedentary activities too soon – particularly those working in reception classes (with children aged four to five years) (WAG 2003) – and that this was having a negative impact on children's motivation to learn and, in the longer term, to stay in full-time education (Barton 2002). The subsequent proposals for the Foundation Phase Framework (ACCAC 2004) made clear a commitment to active, play-based experiential learning not only for children in nursery and reception classes but throughout Key Stage One (for children aged five to seven years).

The current Foundation Phase Framework (WAG 2008) identifies seven areas of learning although it is maintained that these should not be approached in isolation but should form part of a holistic, integrated, cross-curricular approach. Indeed, while retaining learning outcomes, the Framework emphasises that it is personal and social development, well-being and cultural diversity which are 'at the heart of the Foundation Phase' (2008, 15). Similarly, and reflecting the words of Plowden 40 years before, it maintains that the child should be 'at the heart of any planned curriculum' (2008, 6). The official introduction of the Foundation Phase started in nursery

classes in September 2008: it is anticipated that roll-out will be completed in September 2011.

The Reggio philosophy and child-led learning

While in England and Wales early years education policy appears to have shifted direction in relation to curriculum, pedagogy and underpinning theories of learning, by contrast the infant and toddler centres of the municipality of Reggio Emilia are rooted in a coherent, well-defined theory of knowledge which resonates with socio-cultural principles. The theory proposes that knowledge is co-constructed between participants through communication and reflection *upon*, and analysis *of*, the learning process itself. This leads to an emphasis on relationships, collaboration, negotiation and, ultimately, meaning-making.

The cornerstone of Reggio ideology is a strong construction of the child, 'rich in potential, strong, powerful and competent' (Malaguzzi 1993, 10). This child is viewed not in isolation but as connected to other society members, in a 'system of education based on relationships' (Malaguzzi op. cit.). A rich and social child has major implications for pedagogical practice. The dynamics of the teacher–child relationship changes from the traditional model of expert–novice to that of a 'partnership of learning' (Gandini 1993, 6): practitioners act as co-researchers, co-constructing and deconstructing knowledge (Moss 2006). Collaboration between all participants in the learning process is seen as essential with the child playing the role of protagonist within a community of enquiry, constantly attempting to make sense of his or her world through interaction and collaboration with peers and adults. Young children symbolically represent their ideas through, for example, drawing, painting, dance, singing, speaking, mime and play. Children reflect on their representations in order to clarify meaning and begin to recognise that their actions and representations can communicate meaning to their social group. Over time, developing concepts can be revisited in different media, allowing children to re-examine their thinking in order to gain multiple perspectives.

Reggio pedagogues do not advocate the use of a predetermined curriculum that would undervalue their construction of the child; instead, organic projects are used as a vehicle for learning. The Italian term '*progettazione*' is used to describe the complex interaction between the projects in which children are engaged, the ongoing processes of planning and the process of documenting the learning process. Teachers often work with small groups of children interested in similar problems whilst other children undertake self-selected activities. These projects do not have pre-determined linear outcomes; rather they are compared to 'a journey, where one finds the way using a compass' (Rinaldi 1998, 119). Value is placed on obtaining a group understanding through constant dialogue, with emphasis on constructing and reconstructing ideas. Diverse, conflicting and different viewpoints are seen as a driving force for learning as children (and adults) are forced to reconsider their own developing interpretations and perspectives.

The multifaceted process of documentation attempts to interpret this voyage of learning (Forman and Fyfe 1998), so making that learning visible. Through group analyses of dialogue, observations and annotated representations there is an attempt to formulate a theory of the child's (or group of children's) theoretical perspective (Forman 2000). This acts not only as a way of understanding and evaluating the thinking of the children but also as a pedagogical tool. In addition, as teachers acting as

researchers discuss and justify their own interpretations it can be viewed as a tool for professional development. Documentation can also be seen as a democratic process – a *shared* testimony of the learning journey.

Research aims and methods

Reggio practices are embedded, and continue to develop, within a particular social and cultural context. They have been influenced by an engagement with particular philosophies and theories. As Reggio pedagogues and other commentators (e.g. Abbott and Nutbrown 2001) have pointed out, they cannot be transported wholesale into other cultural settings. This being the case, the aim of our project was to support teachers in using Reggio as a catalyst or mirror in order to gain a greater understanding of their *own* professional practice within the Welsh context. At the same time, recognising the challenges that may be posed by the introduction of the Foundation Phase framework, we were particularly interested in supporting teachers' explorations of child-led learning.

Headteachers in two local authorities (the project funders) were invited to nominate teachers who were interested in becoming involved in this research. The participants – seven teachers working in five schools (four primary schools and one infant school) – were selected by the Early Years Advisers on the basis of their enthusiasm for finding out more about the Reggio Emilia philosophy. Two of the teachers were working in nursery classes (with children aged three to four years), two in reception classes (with children aged four to five years) and three in year one classes (with children aged five to six years). The teachers' professional experience ranged from four to 28 years. None of the schools was involved in the piloting of the Foundation Phase.

Underlying this project, which ran for nine months, was a commitment to sociocultural approaches: teachers were seen as partners in the research process and we emphasised discussion and collaborative meaning-making. Overall, the project adopted a loosely conceived action research approach: initially the research team identified an aspect of Reggio approach ('projects') that would form the basis of their explorations in schools. The teachers chose how (and how far) this approach would be implemented in their different settings and having tried out a particular strategy, evaluated this and refined and developed their understanding and action.

Initial interviews and one-hour (video-recorded) observations of teachers working with children on 'projects' were undertaken in order to establish a 'baseline' for comparing any changes in the teachers' thinking about Reggio philosophy and in their personal theories. During the course of the project, two further observations and interviews aimed to investigate any shifts in teachers' understanding of the Reggio philosophy and to pinpoint any critical incidents that had occurred which had led to a change in either practice or perception.

The teachers also attended a series of seminars held at the university. These took the form of an initial presentation followed by discussion in which the research team co-constructed key elements of the Reggio philosophy. In order to support their reflective practice teachers were asked to undertake a number of tasks (such as audio-taping their interactions with children) and to keep a journal. At the end of the project teachers shared with others *their* story of engagement with Reggio Emilia within their schools. Presentations formed the basis of a report in which teachers reflected on their learning and commented on the uses of Reggio Emilia within the Welsh context.

The interviews and seminars were audio-recorded (approximately 70 hours); these were then transcribed and analysed with codes used to identify themes and to structure, interact with and think about the data (Coffey and Atkinson 1996). In addition, we devised a framework to support the analysis of observed activities. This enabled us to consider and compare specific aspects of observed activity including: whether outcomes were specified by the teacher and if so, what these were focused on (for example, the learning of phonics or the development of social skills); whether the activity was teacher- or child-initiated and teacher- or child-led; and whether adult–child interactions were essentially 'open' (where children's ideas were encouraged and explored) or 'closed' (where children were rewarded for the right answer). Field notes were made throughout the research period of observations, seminars and internet and telephone communication. These and the documentary evidence collected were analysed and used to build and explore the emergent themes.

Findings

The findings are presented in relation to four of the key themes discussed during the seminars: the image of the child, projects, the role of the teacher and documentation.

Image of the child

In one of the early seminars we discussed what might be meant by the 'strong' child. Some teachers interpreted the word 'strong' in a negative way – as in headstrong – or in relation to academic work – as a high achiever in literacy or numeracy. Others maintained that the strong child was, for example, 'one with self worth, self-belief and not afraid to challenge'. In all cases, strength was a construct applied to particular individuals rather than to all children.

In later seminars the teachers reported that when involved in 'projects', many children whom they had perceived to be 'high achievers' floundered: they found it difficult to make decisions and to frame, analyse and devise solutions for the more complex, conceptual problems they were encountering. The teachers maintained that these children were often concerned when there was no apparent right answer and sought constant reassurance. At the same time, several children whom the teachers maintained had previously been 'invisible' demonstrated a willingness and capacity to engage with projects: they were seen to invent, take risks, collaborate and persevere in finding solutions to the problems they encountered. This led the teachers to question the appropriateness of their own understandings of ability as well as more general views of intelligence. They asked, for example, 'Why is intelligence framed in terms of academic attainment?' and 'Are there are other dispositions, attributes and skills that are even more important to consider?'. As one teacher noted:

> Children who I initially thought of as low ability, fidgety boys I now feel have fantastic problem solving skills … this approach has made me question what I thought was a bright child and has turned on its head how I rate the children in my class.

Projects

The teachers decided to allocate a certain time during most days for exploring child-led learning through Reggio-inspired projects. Initially, these projects tended to be

framed as 'topics' – teacher-initiated and teacher-led themes which incorporated a range of linked activities focused on meeting predetermined outcomes. Indeed, the idea of projects emerging from children's ideas and interests appeared to be challenging for teachers. The teachers maintained that it was not possible to allow time for children's ideas to clarify and develop (and for them to engage with these) given the time frame within which we were working and the pressures of meeting externally imposed targets. As a result, when identifying the focus of projects, most teachers made use of their pre-planned theme (e.g. 'minibeasts', 'growing' and 'water').

Projects all started with an initial stimulus activity. Most teachers used this opportunity to ask children what they wanted to *know* with subsequent activities focused on finding out knowledge/factual information (e.g. 'What does this creature like to eat?'). As one teacher later commented: 'I felt we were not exploring or confronting their [the children's] thoughts but asking questions to determine what they didn't know….' One teacher explored what children wanted *to do*: here the focus was more on practical activity; another asked children about problems they would like to solve. The teachers also acknowledged that, 'in case the children didn't come up with anything' they had already considered how the project might develop and had devised appropriate activities.

During the study the teachers' initial attempts at projects stalled: they felt there was 'nowhere else to go'. One teacher later commented that this may have been because their projects were 'linear and content-focused'. Another maintained that she recognised that while she was trying to allow children some autonomy, she was 'still delivering the content in the background'. As a consequence, most of the teachers decided (in one teacher's words) to 'step back, relax and let the children take the lead', re-launching their projects but this time allowing the children to determine the direction in which these would go and not expecting all children to be involved in all project activity. For some teachers, this acted as an important catalyst in allowing them to see the child as a competent learner. For example, a Year One teacher wrote in her reflective journal:

> Wow! Talked to my class about the project. They have so many brilliant ideas and questions they want to answer – I am so enthused by their responses and attitude….They have come up with starting points that I would not have dreamt of….

It was noted that this teacher was particularly enthusiastic about encouraging child-led learning and seemed very comfortable 'to let go of the control'. However, she later maintained that it was 'so easy to slip back into thinking about children's activities in terms of targets and outcomes'. She described, as an example, an activity in which she took the children to the beach in order to make sand sculptures using shells, seaweed and stone. She spoke of her increasing frustration with one boy who appeared uninterested in this activity and instead was intent on digging a hole in the sand. Realising that other children were becoming distracted by this, she eventually decided to ask him what he was doing. The boy explained that he had found water in the hole and wanted to find out where it had come from. He was asking questions such as 'What would happen to this water if he dug deeper?' and 'Would sea creatures swim into his hole?' The teacher commented that this incident had made her realise that she had been focusing so closely on meeting her target that she had not been 'listening' to the boy. As a result, she commented, she had missed an important opportunity to support his learning.

Towards the end of our study this teacher became increasingly anxious about the slow-moving nature of projects and was concerned that the children were 'not acquiring sufficient subject knowledge'. As a result, like others, she felt the necessity to supplement project work with the direct teaching of factual knowledge. The teacher maintained, however, that the responses of children to this teaching (of the water cycle) were 'better than … in previous years'. She concluded that children had benefited in terms of attainment, attitude and enjoyment from having time to explore their own ideas before moving on to 'reality': teacher-led activity focused on the acquisition of factual subject knowledge and basic skills.

Role of the teacher

While the teachers quickly adopted the Reggio discourse, our analysis of observed activities and data collected from recordings of seminars revealed that, while warm and encouraging in their interactions with children, in the early stages of the project most teachers tended to be directive and employ closed questioning. In addition, the teachers found it challenging to support children in following their own interests and exploring their own theories when these were deemed to be 'inaccurate'. Teachers felt that it was not appropriate to allow children to continue with misconceptions ('they need to be *told* the 'right' answer') or to develop themes outside the bounds of what was acceptable within a particular subject discipline (such as when working with the topic of minibeasts, making fans for insects). At the same time, teachers were concerned that it would not be in the 'spirit of Reggio' to correct them. One teacher commented in her final report that there had been a great deal of discussion in her setting about 'when to tell children the correct information'.

Over time there were apparent shifts in the classroom practice of some of the teachers. For example, classroom observations revealed that while activities tended to remain teacher-initiated, some teachers were allowing children input into the direction in which these activities developed and had also begun to make more use of open questions. One teacher reflected on her recognition of significant changes to the way in which she worked when supporting children in their projects: in relation to planning and the desire to meet prescribed outcomes she was much more 'laid back' while in relation to listening to and interacting with children she was 'much more active'.

Documentation

Given the time constraints it was not possible to explore documentation in detail and thus it was not extensively developed by the teachers. In the early stages of the project we noted that documentation was often interpreted as 'display', this being used to celebrate the products of activities and as a form of accountability – for example, to parents, other teachers, the head teacher and the inspectorate. The notion of documentation as a dynamic representation of children's thinking with which adults and children maintained an ongoing dialogue was therefore extremely challenging.

As the project progressed, the idea of using display boards to record the development of the project and children's ideas regarding their explorations was taken on by many teachers. It was unclear, however, whether teachers, either individually or collaboratively, used documentation as a tool for analysis and the development (co-construction) of understandings. However, most of the teachers acknowledged the potential of documentation. One teacher, for example, noted that annotating one piece

of graphic representation had given her 'a far greater understanding of the ideas and understanding of the child than the rest of the year's work put together'. This process, she noted, had made her focus on what the child could do rather than on what the child could not do. Another teacher pointed out that documentation was not something that teachers could undertake without the involvement of the child: 'the drawings or notes made by children can be misleading or misunderstood by adults unless they are discussed together'.

Discussion

Looking through a different lens

One of the key aims of this study was to support the development of teachers' understandings about their own thinking and practice. An engagement with Reggio philosophy was experienced cognitively, physically and affectively by teachers, and seemed, at different times, to inspire, confuse, concern and irritate them. Looking 'through a different lens' did appear to help 'make the tacit explicit' (Schön 1983). However, this was not always comfortable for teachers who increasingly recognised the conflict and contradictions between what they did, what they thought they did and what they wanted to achieve.

While the fracture between practitioners' intentions and their actions is unsurprising given the complexity, immediacy and unpredictability of professional practice (Schön 1983) the teachers appeared to be referring to deeper and more significant rifts. For example, while in the seminars they maintained their commitment to traditional 'child-centred' values, many teachers became aware that the activities they devised and the pedagogical approaches they implemented were not consistent with these values. Indeed, in the classroom observations and in the conversations with children that were taped and analysed by teachers, it was noted that although they maintained they were becoming more 'child-centred' in their approach, their interactions, while warmer and more encouraging, essentially remained closed. Similarly, while the teachers maintained that they allowed children some 'autonomy' in their learning, it appeared that autonomy was interpreted as choice between several – normally content-focused – planned activities. This being the case, the teachers recognised that their practice and the way in which they thought about classroom events was through a lens of 'targets and outcomes'. To a greater or lesser extent, this was the case for all teachers regardless of the age phase in which they were working, or their initial teacher 'training', or the length and nature of their professional experience.

Subject-centred teachers

The dominance of an instrumental and subject-centred discourse was particularly noticeable in the teachers' early interpretations of Reggio philosophy – for example, in their construction of the child (generally as weak and overwhelmingly in relation to academic attainment), in their framing of 'projects' as 'topic work' and of 'documentation' as 'display'. In this respect, and from a constructivist perspective, teachers were interpreting information in relation to what was known (von Glasersfeld 1995); like the practitioners in Edwards's (2006) study, they were 'reading' socio-cultural theory through the lens of their existing understandings.

The embeddedness of this discourse was particularly visible in the way the teachers thought about – and talked about – subject knowledge. First, most teachers

indicated that their normal practice predominantly focused on the teaching of factual knowledge and basic skills rather than, for example, concepts and processes. Second, most teachers acknowledged that they were uncomfortable about supporting the development of children's ideas and theories when these were seen as being inaccurate or when activities crossed and blurred recognised subject boundaries. Third, it was noted that even though teachers referred to, and valued, the positive impact that child-led learning appeared to have on the children's attitudes towards learning and their social and communication skills, they still felt the need to continue with or return to their normal outcomes-led activities. Thus, a particular version of subject-centred teaching appeared to have become deeply inscribed in the teachers' thinking and practice. Indeed, as those critiques of 1970s and 1980s child-centred ideology had hoped, it had arguably become part of the teachers' professional identity: the teachers essentially saw their expertise as founded on the teaching of factual knowledge and basic skills and evaluated their own success as a teacher in relation to how effectively they achieved this goal.

It was unsurprising, then, that child-led learning was perceived to be demanding in a number of ways: first, the teachers recognised that it was, for example, easier to tell children what they need to know than set up an experience that extended or confronted their thinking. Second, child-led learning required teachers to loosen their control; given the requirement to meet prescribed targets and outcomes this may have been too great a risk to take. Third, supporting child-led learning appeared to involve the development of complex cognitive processes and skills. These included:

- *reconstructing*: seeing the child as (believing the child to be) a competent person and learner;
- *'listening'*: engaging in concentrated, focused observations of children in different situations and social encounters;
- *letting go*: relinquishing the construction of 'teacher as expert' in favour of 'teacher as partner in a learning process'; and relinquishing tight control over what and how children learn;
- *refocusing:* shifting their attention away from targets, content and outcomes and on to individual children's ideas, interests and their learning;
- *framing:* holding and giving form to the children's streams of thoughts and ideas – to make these visible, so that in terms of future learning possibilities they may be rejected, built on or further explored;
- *restraining:* controlling the desire always to 'tell' children and knowing how and when to set up situations and make use of questions and experiences which aim to extend, consolidate or confront children's ideas;
- *searching:* recognising that there is more than one pathway to understanding and helping the child to explore these pathways.

In our view this requires considerable time as well as courage, commitment and support.

Conclusion

In this research the approach adopted in the pre-schools of Reggio Emilia was not seen as a model of good early years practice but as a means of making visible teachers' thinking and practice and, in the light of the proposed Foundation Phase for Wales, as

a catalyst for exploring child-led learning. Looking at their practice 'through another lens' enabled the teachers to gain a greater insight into their implicit and explicit theories of learning and, as a result, exposed their commitment to, and the pervasiveness and embeddedness of, an approach dominated by prescribed and subject-related outcomes (see also Maynard and Waters 2007). Moving away from this approach and supporting child-led learning thus proved to be complex and challenging.

The roll-out of the Foundation Phase Framework began in September 2008; from September 2009 it included all children in reception classes. Given that the Framework (WAG 2008) retains learning outcomes that are cross-referenced to the current national curriculum level descriptors, it may be – as in the 1970s and 1980s – that some teachers adopt a 'child-centred' discourse, integrate areas of learning into planned topics and continue to teach the basic skills.

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