

Commentary/Discussion Paper

Pedagogical Connections, Boundaries and Barriers: the Place of Travel in Teachers' Professional Development

Kathy Goouch and Hazel Bryan
Canterbury Christ Church University, England

Abstract

There has been increasing interest shown by those concerned with young children's learning in international policy and practice. By travelling ourselves, we sought to understand the imperative for practitioners to look beyond their own geographical and cultural locations for guidance. In order to understand this, the authors have considered issues of teacher identity, political dominance and contexts of influence. In addition, metaphors to extend and understand the idea of 'teacher travellers' have been employed in order to consider the 'impulse' to travel, their 'journeys', their 'return' and the 'impact' of their travels. The article critically considers the question of what nourishes and sustains a teacher's sense of professional identity and tentatively concludes that where a guiding philosophy exists and is clearly articulated in policy and practice, then a synthesis of other models enhances pedagogy. However, where such a guiding philosophy is absent, a 'cut and paste' model is applied.

Key Words: Professional identity, internationalisation, critical pedagogy

Introduction

This research seeks to reveal the genesis, influences and inspirations for practice in the early years of education. By mapping dominant discourses in three European settings (Italy: Reggio Emilia, Sweden: Stockholm, United Kingdom: South East England), this study explores domains of influence which impact upon professionals and their practice. While there is already well documented research into the importance and levels of teachers' own subject knowledge to support young children's learning (Cullen 2000), this paper instead considers influences on teachers as they strive to construct models of practice.

We began by asking what we knew about the adults who are employed in early educational environments. What makes them do the things they do, say the things they say? Upon what, or whose, beliefs are these practices founded? Upon which policies are these practices developed, or are they developed in spite of policies? A central

question has been to ask ‘who drives policy and practice in the early years of education?’ In the first phase of this study, we began to tentatively explore the following foci:

- Whose vision is being represented in early years practice?
- Who determines practice?
- How is the curriculum realised and/or reconstructed?

Our attempts to fully understand the ways in which practice has been conceived, developed and practiced, and by whom, created an imperative to examine the professional values of teachers. In reading, thinking and debating about policy and practice in the UK, it became increasingly clear that there is currently a connection with practice in other European countries. Early years work in Italy (Reggio Emilia) and in Sweden (Stockholm) appeared to be connected to, and have a very strong influence on, early years work here in research and practice. It also became apparent that some ‘models’ from other countries have been semi-imported and we were interested to discover why, and the ways in which, these models travelled.

We used the analogy of fine wine to develop our thinking here, wondering whether, like some fine wines, these models travelled poorly; and whether history, context and culture created the wine, or the pedagogy, or whether it could be created and consumed anywhere. We have been concerned that, when practice (in any cultural context) is developed, it is in situ, that is located within time and space, geographically situated and therefore, culturally framed. Within this practice, what then do teachers own, what is imposed and what is drawn from other geographical/cultural locations? What is the impact of this apparent ‘melee’ upon the work with young children and how does the teacher reconcile these tensions? Who is the teacher? Upon what is her/his professional identity based? How did it develop? And, critically for our research, what nourishes and sustains her/his sense of professional identity? Without a localised model on which to base practice (as in, for example, Reggio Emilia) how can teachers effectively inform, reflect upon or legitimise their practice?

Political Dominance

The seductive nature of owning a ‘pedagogical peg’ on which to hang structures for practice is clear, particularly when audits and layers of accountability threaten. The temptation to believe in a synergy between, for example, structures drawn from High Scope (United States) or Reggio (Northern Italy), with existing ways of working may at best potentially mask any philosophical base for practice or be in danger of replacing the need for further reflective discourse or model construction. We acknowledge the danger of models imported from elsewhere operating as a ‘veneer’ to validate the work of teachers who may not otherwise feel protected from any dominant or government discourse (Dahlburg, Moss & Pence, 1999) to be able to challenge uninformed pedagogies.

In relation to this idea of a search for safe structures, we also became aware of a warning, that “the personal identity of work has become a situational one, designed to

meet the instrumental purposes of audit accountability (and that) teachers real selves are held in reserve, to be realised in other situations, outside school, or in some different future within” (Woods & Jeffrey, 2004, p.250) and we sought to also verify this concern in relation to early years practice. As more and more centrally ordained initiatives and programmes are introduced, it may be that the idea of principled and ideologically informed practitioners is being driven out of schools to be replaced by a single aim, that is, the delivery of a pre-determined curriculum. Such a deeply undermining change in the expectations demanded of a publicly funded profession could therefore begin to result in a changing professional identity. Indeed, we are warned that teachers, when delivering an externally determined curriculum, are in danger of becoming “operatives of a technology of pedagogy” (Carr, 2000, p.3).

During our travels to Italy and our readings of the principles and philosophy underpinning the preschool work in Reggio Emilia, it became evident that the catalyst for their work was dissatisfaction with the potential for dominant, fascist influences upon children. In Reggio Emilia there existed the desire “to rebuild what had been destroyed”, and Malaguzzi describes “a special kind of teaching, not written in books: a philosophy with its roots strongly embedded in the people, bringing anarchic overtones to the organisation of the school” (Malaguzzi, 2004, p.11). Change, then, grew from the grass roots and, perhaps as a consequence, the language determining practice is the language of relationships, hope and love. Significantly, the pedagogy (and therefore the language) encompassed in Reggio Emilia is Italian, embedded in Italian culture.

The notion of dissatisfaction emerged again in our travels to Stockholm. However, whereas in Reggio the dissatisfaction was originally politically located, in Stockholm it appeared to emanate from an academic community. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Swedish academics were beginning to problematise early years practice and constructs of childhood in relation to their developing understanding of the work in Reggio Emilia and its growing influence on Swedish practitioners. In particular they were concerned about the apparent gap between the “arena of formulation” and the “arena of realisation” (Dahlburg, Moss & Pence, 1999, p.126), that is, the contexts of influence and the context of practice (Bowe, Ball & Gold, 1992).

The current context of influence and the current context of policy documentation in England is realised in the document *A Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners* (DfES 2005) which has been devised by the current Government in the UK. This strategy has three key elements which are particularly relevant to this study:

1. The founding idea is for teachers to have more autonomy and flexibility and for innovation to be in the best interest of the learners.
2. A Smart and Searching Accountability Framework will exist to create “a new relationship with schools”.
3. The principle of collaboration between institutions is to be encouraged in order to drive up standards.

The Strategy intends reform to be radical, describes the changing culture in schools and a new strategic direction to enable teachers to concentrate on their core focus of

teaching. The Secretary of State outlines a “principle of professionalism”. However, ‘professional’ has as part of its etymology ‘expertness’ and so a competing discourse appears within the newly introduced phrase of “professional workforce”.

Dahlburg and Moss (2005) have helped us to understand how the nature of a dominant discourse significantly effects how individuals act upon the world and, specifically, how preschool educators understand preschool education. With the language of outcomes, quality, standards and accountability comes an acceptance and a legitimacy of a particular kind of knowledge and consequently the emergence of a particular kind of professional. The core focus of teaching indicates a particularly reductionist approach to education, leaning more and more towards skills training, deceptively simple to plan, manage and measure and therefore potentially seductive to new or inexperienced practitioners. The suggestion is, from the research work of Dahlburg and Moss as well as the underpinning principles on which the Strategy is based, that professionals can be shaped by “dominant discursive regimes” (Dahlburg & Moss 2005, p.18).

In view of these concerns our subsidiary questions have then become:

1. What is the context of influence from which practice is generated?
2. What nourishes and sustains the values and practices of early years educators?

Layers of Influence

During this first phase of our research work, to address these questions and issues, we applied Hofstede’s model (1991), which helped us to examine the symbols, rituals, heroes and heroines and values of educators. At this time we were actively seeking to understand the layers of practice that we could see explicitly represented in three European settings. We have looked at the ways in which values embodied in early years practice may have emerged from society’s constructs of childhood. These values impact upon the physical structures we provide in which young children are expected to learn, the resources and the curriculum, all of which combine as the embodiment or realisation of principles held or imposed. Like Bernstein (2004), we were aware that “what something is, what it does, one’s evaluation of it (this) is not naturally preordained, it is socially constructed” (p.180). During this phase we attempted to deconstruct notions of spaces and places defined for learning (for example, understanding ‘windows’ and their place in children’s learning spaces both now and in history), attending to architectural influences in Reggio Emilia and tracking these back to new additions to settings in England. The changing nature of playgrounds, outdoor play spaces, outdoor resources can also be attributed to new constructions of what educational provision can be, developed in part by imported specialists.

Teacher Travellers

At this stage, we were aware that, amongst those looking elsewhere for solutions beyond national boundaries, there was a common feeling of dissatisfaction, disillusionment or frustration with existing systems, with unquestioned curricula and with inherited spaces for learning. We describe these teachers as travellers, but could

they also be further defined as either modern day pilgrims or sightseers? Other analogies followed: What was discourse they engaged in? Who were their travelling companions? Did they travel only in their comfort zone or beyond? What travel guides or maps were they using? Did they focus only on tourist sites and monuments? How much contact did they really have with the local cultures? Whose lens did they use to capture images? What artefacts, or souvenirs did they return with? What was the impact of their journey – when, where, how or if any of the influences from their travel are now evidenced in their lives? And indeed are such teacher travellers only to be found in Western Europe and the United States, as others may base their pedagogies upon more cultural ‘certainties’ (Katz 1999)

And so we have identified some teachers as ‘travellers’, inhabiting a range of roles and guises, journeying for varying lengths of time, in different clothes, for different purposes, and whose travels resulted in different outcomes. We are using the term ‘travellers’ in this paper to encompass the idea of teachers as voyagers, pilgrims or sightseers.

Hofstede’s model (1991) was useful to frame our initial thinking and required us to travel ourselves in an attempt to capture some of the inspiration and information that appeared to currently inform the vision of many early years educators. However, in our attempts to understand the contexts of influence for early years practice we found ourselves trapped within the question of: Why do they travel? The possibility of categorising travelling teachers as ‘sightseers’ – that is those seeking a new guiding philosophy or as ‘pilgrims’ – that is those seeking support for their own philosophy, became a significant developmental stage in this work.

Phillips and Ochs’ (2004) *Four Stage Borrowing Model* was particularly influential. However, our interest is not simply in policy borrowing, but also in the way that policy is realised in the early years of education. We wondered whether our teacher travellers would be in a position to understand and appreciate the deep culture of a setting and the historical journey that has taken place for that setting to have emerged and evolved. Phillips and Ochs’ model offers this developmental process:

- Cross national attraction
- Decision making
- Implementation
- Internalisation

Whilst helpful, this model needed to be modified in order for us to appropriate it for our study. The following process model, therefore, has been devised as a way of understanding the route from policy into practice:

1. The Impulse: That is, what was the genesis of the interest?
2. The Journey: This could either be real or metaphorical.
3. The Return: When the following might occur.... (a) the experience is disregarded (which might be a principled response); (b) the experience

percolates (an undefined period of incubation), and (c) action is taken (immediate action, medium term action or long term influence).

4. The Impact: The potential for recontextualisation of practice.

Conversations and Images

To help our understanding of this process meet with practice, we identified two case studies, drawn from a range of teachers who fall into the category of 'travellers'. The teachers were selected because of their ability to articulate clearly their journey from a perspective gathered at or near the conclusion of the process. Details of the case study material will not be presented in this paper, where only some tentative understandings are being considered. However, in both cases, there appears to have been clear dissatisfaction with the status-quo and this has been the impulse from which new influences have been sought by the teachers. The teachers we interviewed expressed feelings of disillusionment and frustration with current practice, with unquestioned rituals and with the constraints imposed by the architecture of schools. One of the teachers claimed that she reached a stage where she felt personally and deeply concerned about the effects of practice on the children in her care:

This is wrong, I knew what we were doing with children was wrong.

Political imperatives and negative external evaluations were also a catalyst for an alternative model to be sought:

Our results were very poor.

One of the concerns that we had was that, in many minds, Reggio Emilia appeared to represent a creative model as opposed to the current UK systems which crudely appeared in people's minds to represent a standards model. However, from our interviews we found that the decisions to look elsewhere were clearly based upon the desire for a guiding philosophy and enabling structures that met with educators' own values. Interestingly, in our sample early years settings, a 'quick fix' (Phillips and Ochs 2004) was not an acceptable solution.

When I heard about Reggio I wanted to move my practice to Italy. But my Head teacher said no, we must move there inch by inch.

Rather, a synthesis of theory and realistic practical options was developed, based upon work with external bodies who were funded to work with individual and consortia of settings (for example Creative Partnerships, Artists in Residence, Architects and Poets in Residence) and teachers seeking inspiration from their own overseas visits. From our interviews and conversations then it became clear that these teachers were both reflective and informed and, importantly, they knew that they were seeking more than just practice guidance; that it was in fact a guiding philosophy that they sought.

However, we would contend that guiding philosophies cannot be transported any more than practice. In Reggio Emilia, as in the Stockholm project, the guiding philosophy can be understood as embracing reified inexactness, hence the curriculum and the architecture is shaped around 'the child'. States of uncertainty are acceptable at policy level and in practice and the children's own levels of learning become both the impulse and the driving force for a curriculum. Constructs of childhood, architecture and curriculum are therefore deeply embedded at every level of policy and practice. For these reasons, 'models' do not simply travel.

A key finding at this stage has been that, in the settings where an existing guiding philosophy exists, and has been clearly articulated in policy and practice, then a synthesis of other models of practice has enhanced their work. In contrast to this, where a guiding philosophy has been absent, a 'cut and paste' model has been applied with an absence of any supporting discourse. Thus, some practitioners will claim to 'do Reggio' once a week, for example, while maintaining a didactic and instructional approach for the remaining time.

Uncertainty in postmodernist terms has been acknowledged as a catalyst for creativity and creative practices (Giroux 2002). Professional discourse then, that problematises and deconstructs practice and beliefs and generates a way of understanding pedagogy, may be the tool to sustain and nourish professionals at all levels. Research and development projects with practitioners and academics engaged in professional and purposeful dialogic exchange at local levels have provided evidence of such nourishment (see for example Dahlburg, Moss & Pence, 1999). So, if dissatisfaction has emerged as one catalyst for change, then pedagogical discourse has evolved as central to reconstruction.

As we have endeavoured to understand the practice of early years professionals we have been troubled by the use of the term 'models' and the inherent danger of using it as a synonym for 'exemplar'. We needed to understand what we meant by 'model' in educational fields. Our understanding is this: life is chaotic; work within education in particular is dynamic and complex. It might be organic, whilst at the same time responding to a range of pressures from outside, often in a top down manner. Therefore, in order to understand what we do, to discuss in a meaningful way, to enable effective discourse, the term 'model' is applied simply to represent a construct. Within each construct, there is a culture, generated and regenerated by symbolic systems and by that we mean language, political contexts, documentation, literature, space and structures. Any model (of practice) is the embodiment or realisation of the discourse. Dialogic opportunities with other professionals, within education and across disciplines, also help to validate and legitimise pedagogical stances.

Last Words: Genesis, Impulses and Research

In effect, this study has been a staged process that can perhaps be described in two ways. Methodologically, the first stage could be described as centring upon developing an understanding of whose visions were determining practice in the early years; the second stage identified impulses, inspiration and indigenisation. Alternatively we could

describe the study as divided between the identification of ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ influences to practice, that is those embedded constructs, values and principles and either nebulous or concrete models that became contexts of influence from outside.

However, another interesting strand of this work has been for us, as researchers, to look closely at our own contexts of influence and our own ‘research identity’ (Gaffney 2002). In research studies we often, and are encouraged to, search for models on which to base or contrast our work. Reference to individual principles, or guiding philosophies are often somewhat absent from research studies as they strive for objectivity, and almost anonymity, through the use of impersonal grammars, statistical information and diagrammatic representation.

The process of this study has been littered by passionate debate, frustration at some early years educators’ humility or inability to articulate what seems sometimes abundantly clear to outsiders and astonishment at the apparent adulation of ‘otherness’ when models from elsewhere are formalised and presented. The genesis of this work was the passion we felt for reconstructing the professional identity of educators. By co-constructing a discourse, and a range of metaphors, for understanding policy, practice and professionalism, that is synthesis and synergy rather than cut and paste, we have also become closer to our own impulses for research and our own inspirations for further study.

Our personal journeys – both real and metaphorical – have been cataclysmic in supporting clearer understanding of our own deeply held guiding philosophies. Working as co-researchers has helped to more clearly define the benefits to be gained through such professional discourse. Through debate and documentation our own guiding philosophies have been exposed and defined and our sense of ourselves, as professionals, sustained. As in Reggio Emilia preschools, such discursive opportunities and close engagement provides nourishment to ever developing values and principles.

In conclusion, and in answer to our key questions, the significant context of influence from which practice is generated appears to be constructed upon guiding principles born from socially constructed values. However, these principles need to be nourished and sustained to survive overlaying models from taking precedence. This is only achievable through engagement in professional, pedagogical discourse.

References

- Bernstein, B. (2004). Social class and pedagogic practice. In S.J. Ball (Ed.), *The RoutledgeFalmer reader in sociology of education*. (pp.196-217). London: RoutledgeFalmer
- Bowe, R., Ball, S.J. & Gold, A. (1992). *Reforming education and changing schools*. London: Routledge.
- Carr, D. (2000). *Professionalism and ethics in teaching*. London: Routledge

- Cullen, J. (2000). The early years, conceptual issues and future challenges. *NZ Research in Early Childhood Education Journal*, 3, 3-13.
- Dahlburg G, Moss, P. & Pence, A. (1999). Beyond quality in early childhood education and care: Postmodern perspective. London: Routledge
- Dahlburg, G & Moss, P. (2005). *Ethics and politics in early childhood education*. London: RoutledgeFalmer
- Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (2005). *Five year strategy for children and learners*. London: The Stationary Office
- Gaffney, M. (2002). Research as a journey: The new researcher as a first-time traveller. *NZ Research in Early Childhood Education Journal*, 5, 1-11
- Giroux, H. (2002). Crossing the boundaries of educational discourse: Modernism, post modernism and feminism. In A.H. Halsey, H. Lauder, P. Brown & A. S. Wells (Eds.), *Education, culture, economy and society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Hofstede, G. (1991). *Cultures and organizations: Software of the mind*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Katz, L.G. (1999). International perspectives on early childhood education: Lessons from my travels. *Early childhood Research and Practice*, (1)1. <http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v1n1/katz.html>
- Malaguzzi, L. (2004). Walking on threads of silk, Interview with Loris Malaguzzi by Carlo Barsotti. *Children in Europe*, Issue 6, 10-15
- Phillips, D. & Ochs, K. (2004). Researching policy borrowing: some methodological challenges in comparative education. *British Educational Journal* (30)6, 773-784
- Woods, P. & Jeffrey, B. (2004). The reconstruction of primary teachers' identities. In S.J. Ball (Ed.), *The RoutledgeFalmer reader in sociology of education*, (pp.221-239). London: RoutledgeFalmer

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kathy Gooch is a Senior Lecturer at Canterbury Christ Church University, England. Her research interests for many years have combined the fields of early years education and literacy. This collaborative research with Hazel has served to test and strengthen some tentative understandings of professionals, pedagogy and professionalism, as they may apply to the early years of education. Kathy is currently examining ways in which teachers co-author oral stories intuitively with children in early years play contexts, seeking to understand and celebrate respectful professional practice.

Hazel Bryan is a Principal Lecturer at Canterbury Christ Church University, England. Her research interests include literacy and constructs of teacher professionalism. The formation of professional identity and the influence of the political arena upon this process are of particular interest. This collaboration with Kathy has evolved over a number of years, and continues to develop. Hazel is currently working collaboratively on the development and sustainability of the professional identity and community of mentors, and on a piece considering story telling in Religious Education from a Post Modern perspective.