

## Capturing Student Perspectives Through a ‘Reggio’ Lens

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This research considers the views and perspectives of a group of students on an Education Studies and Early Years course in an English university that took part in an arts project inspired by the philosophy and pedagogy of the Reggio Emilia preschools in Italy. This ethnographic study included semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire which provided further themes for discussion. The intention of the research was to explore why the students perceived this style of learning as so difficult in order to support future pedagogical development on the course. Findings suggest that there is more preparatory work needed before students can comfortably engage with this approach to study.

Education Studies programs in England, which are academic rather than combined with teacher education programs, are distinguished by their critical focus on pedagogical and structural issues as related to all phases of education and training. The Education Studies and Early Years degree program in this study, which is located in a Higher Education Institution (HEI) in the North West of England, specifically encompasses critical thinking in relation to early years practice and provision. As part of this critical approach, attention is paid to significant international and radical examples of preschool education, in particular that of the Reggio Emilia preschools in northern Italy. The study reported here emerged from the lecturers’ attempts to bring pedagogical approaches embedded in the Reggio Emilia preschools into the higher education arena in order to consolidate students’ experiential understanding of this model of education.

The “module” or short course of study, which formed the basis for the study accounts for 20 credits of the overall program and involves third-year students, who are in their final degree year, in a visit to a local museum in order to consider what sparks or provokes their imagination and curiosity. The specific museum has been chosen because it embraces the ideas of Reggio Emilia by providing an open plan space with areas for discussion and interaction, which itself was created with support from local children. During the students’ visit to the museum they are encouraged to work in a collaborative and open-ended way and understand how children think creatively and imaginatively. To lay the foundations of the project, the students are previously given an introduction to the history, philosophy, and pedagogy of Reggio Emilia, and they also go out into the community on short practice visits. Nevertheless, it was noted that every year since the module had been introduced in 2010, tensions linked to its freedom had emerged during the project work both between tutor and students and students themselves. Therefore, in 2014 this small scale exploratory research study was conducted in order to understand better the source of these tensions and to

find out what students were finding difficult about the module and why.

The type of tensions that were generated by the approach to the module suggested that the students resisted the idea of its pedagogic freedom. Indeed, they often stated that they would rather have “ten essays than this!” Thus, relevant to the findings that emerged from this reported exploration, the paper also considers areas such as students’ previous experiences in learning and the emotions associated with transition from school, with its more prescribed focus on targets, to the expected independent learning in higher education in England.

This study can be considered original in that it crosses the boundaries of early and higher education. To enable students to understand a pedagogic approach popular in early years education, it seems logical that their understanding will be heightened if they see it modeled by lecturers and experience it first-hand, albeit from the vantage point of young adulthood. There are few similar reported studies with higher education students despite the fact that Crosling, Nair, and Vaithilingam (2015) point out the importance for sustainable economic development of facilitating creativity and innovation through higher education.

Relevant research has been conducted into students and tutor experiences of group work in higher education, for example, Elliott and Reynolds’ (2014) study with international students which alludes to the notion of “learning shock” (Griffiths, Winstanley, & Gabriel, 2005) when students meet unfamiliar pedagogical approaches. However, our key point is that in this and other similar studies the creative philosophy of the Reggio preschools has not been directly drawn from, with the exception of Heyward (2010), who cites Reggio Emilia approaches as enabling students to face and deal with strong emotions in the midst of learning. Maynard and Chicken (2010) used approaches derived from Reggio Emilia preschools in their research with early years practitioners (rather than higher education students) and found that the practitioners were limited by their own preconceptions of prescribed outcomes. Nevertheless, whole-hearted immersion in Reggio

Emilia approaches, in order to achieve creative and collaborative ends in the realm of higher education makes this study of particular interest.

### **The Pedagogy of Reggio Emilia**

#### **Practicing “Child-Centered” Learning**

It is important to place the study reported here firmly in the philosophical context of the Reggio Emilia preschool project with its strong social cultural and theoretical aspects. The community of Reggio Emilia grew out of the devastation of the Second World War when the town was rebuilt through the Women’s Liberation Movement, embedding a strong foundation of social, community and moral responsibility. Cooperative movements provided the services, one of which one was the municipal preschools. These preschools embraced the idea that education is a shared experience between a democratic society and its citizens who want to take full responsibility for *all* children. One fundamental reason why “Reggio” is still seen as an enduring model of excellence is its “willingness to border cross” (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 4), as it continually draws on developing theories and concepts. This involves everyone within the community in having a commitment to the welfare of all children and working together with a shared responsibility and understanding. This participation encompasses shared meanings and recognition of the equal contribution that everyone brings with them, regardless of their history or culture, as a community of learners. Robin Alexander (2013) notes that the epistemology of a curriculum is central along with cultural and pedagogical understanding and “direct, hands-on local knowledge of the children being taught and the families and communities to which they belong” (p. 11). Another crucial aspect of the Reggio pedagogical experiment is the recognition of the importance of reflecting and experimenting with ideas, thus developing meanings and interpretations of practice: the “border crossing,” as noted by Rinaldi (2006) above.

#### **Providing a Social Constructivist Environment**

Hoyuelos (2013) suggests that Jean Piaget’s work was the initial inspiration of the Reggio Emilia founding Director Loris Malaguzzi. This meant that the child was seen as an investigator and explorer within the environment with the adult’s role being to facilitate and ensure the right conditions for learning. Malaguzzi was one of the first to “import” (Hoyuelos, 2013, p. 98) Piagetian influences into Italian settings, admiring his view of the constructivist child. However, Malaguzzi deconstructed aspects of Piaget’s theory and stressed the additional importance of the social, cultural, and

historical perspectives of the child. The adult’s role was not as a director or transmitter of knowledge, but as a co-researcher learning alongside the child. The adult and child therefore learned in a social-constructivist “process of meaning making in continuous encounters with others and the world ...as co-constructors of knowledge and culture” (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 6). These “continuous encounters” Malaguzzi calls “the concept of circuitry” (cited in Hoyuelos, 2013, p. 125), and he reminds adults of the importance of the “active relationship between one who learns and the one who teaches” (p. 125). Importantly, there are no children with “special needs” in Reggio, only recognition of difference as pedagogy of listening. By valuing difference, Reggio promotes rich values of participation, democracy, open ended learning, and emotional cognitive educational processes. This lies at the heart of Reggio: an awareness of reciprocal relationships. Children are encouraged to listen and negotiate with their peers in long-term projects. This develops a strong sense of self, as noted by Thornton and Brunton (2009) who observe that Reggio Emilia preschools value “different opinions, respecting the knowledge children already have, welcoming doubt and uncertainty, and developing children’s skills in asking questions of themselves and others” (p. 59). The child is viewed as a collaborator, a learner and researcher alongside the adult, and this enables a strong learning context to emerge. This also provides a powerful image of the Reggio child as a strong, confident, capable, and competent learner.

#### **Encouraging the Development of Learners**

Bennett (2004) suggests that there are two defined approaches in early childhood across Europe: the social pedagogic approach, as favored by Reggio Emilia, and the pre-primary or “ready for school” approach as demonstrated by the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE, 2014) in England. Reggio children are considered to be strong and confident, and this approach empowers them to become “active citizens” (Williams, Sheridan, & Sandberg, 2014, p. 227) in their own right. *The Effective Provision of Preschool Education* (EPPE) report (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2004) stresses the importance of a quality early years environment in promoting the development of self-regulating learners. EPPE also places great emphasis on adult-child interactions, identifying sustained shared thinking as a valuable opportunity during which adults can extend, develop, and enable children to talk “authentically” (Whitebread, 2012, p. 7) about their ideas. Siraj-Blatchford (2010) and Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden and Bell (2003) extend this further by stating that quality is dependent upon both cognitive

and social pedagogic interactions between the child and practitioner. Siegler, DeLoache and Eisenberg (2010) also note the emphasis on a learner's "perceived self-efficacy" (p. 356), which Bandura (1994) stresses. Thus, there is plenty of evidence to support the claim that Reggio children develop strong feelings of mastery, that is, high self-esteem, high aspirations of themselves, and a strong sense of belief.

### Enabling the "Hundred Languages" of Creativity

Creativity is an essential element of the Reggio approach, as demonstrated in this extract from Malaguzzi's iconic poem *The Hundred Languages of Children* (translated by Lella Gandini in Edwards, Gandini & Foreman, 1998, p. 3):

The child has  
a hundred languages  
(and a hundred hundred hundred more)  
but they steal ninety-nine.  
The school and the culture  
separate the head from the body.

This expresses the multiple ways in which children communicate to great effect as well as the ways in which these are denied. Thus, the wealth of resources in Reggio pre-schools is vast, openly displayed to enhance ideas and opportunities in the atelier. The resources offer open-ended and creative possibilities. Boyd Cadwell (1997) noted these materials "have the power to engage children's minds, bodies and emotions... and in this way, the children continue to build and rebuild, through the materials, an ever-expanding awareness and understanding of the world and their place in it." (p. 27). As Malaguzzi (1998) outlined, creativity allows children to engage with their world, discovering new meanings. Reggio is not about "art," but about the different and creative ways children interpret their world, using the "hundred languages." Katz (1998) expands this further by recognizing that creativity provides "additional languages available to young children not yet competent in conventional writing and reading" (p. 35). This is in contrast to the English EYFS (DfE, 2014) which recognizes literacy as a specific subject which practitioners need to promote in order to insure that children are "ready for school" (p. 4). This is the culture of readiness which Malaguzzi refers to in the above poem where he talks of separating the head from the body, noting lack of creativity and open ended play opportunities and strong focus on more formal cognitive skill based applications. Thus, there is no curriculum in Reggio Emilia, unlike in England, and the pedagogista and practitioners have total control and autonomy over the learning, drawing on the ideas and provocations of the children as inspirations. Unlike the

English EYFS (DfE, 2014) which promotes teaching and learning to ensure children's "school readiness" (p. 5), Reggio advocates a method of planning and flexible objectives, formulating "hypotheses of what could happen on the basis of their knowledge of children and of previous experiences" (Rinaldi, 1998, p. 113).

### Learning in Collaboration

As a result of the above features, an important element of the Reggio approach is the collaborative working, which can range from collaboration with and between individuals, pairs, or small groups. There is total autonomy in how the groups are formed. In a Reggio classroom there will be multiple levels of learning occurring, with children and adults in collaboration together. The children can support and move between groups as a "competent audience" (Seidel, 2001, p. 319), and the adult facilitating the processes can as well. The children understand that there is a significance to group working and they accept the need to be dependent upon their peers. There is trust in their relationship and in the democratic participation, and as ideas evolve, the documentation makes them visible to the children and helps form the next stage of the process. It is an emotional experience as well as a cognitive one because ultimately through the collaboration and discussion it creates a "collective body of knowledge" (Krechevsky & Mardell, 2001, p. 286). This process of "design, discourse and documentation" (Forman & Fyfe, 1998, p. 240) provides opportunities for children to think in creative and divergent ways, while learning about empathy, respect for others and tolerance. This is a community of learners, as Malaguzzi and the Women's Movement envisaged. As Mooney (2000) noted, John Dewey also advocated that learning should be open ended and an educative experience, not just about having fun, and the success of learning is in the potential of new lines of discovery and thinking, so that children are "confident in their ability to dive in and satisfy their curiosity" (p. 19).

### Research Methods

The study both researched and emulated Reggio Emilia pedagogical approaches in a higher education context. The research design reflected the creativity and flexibility of Reggio approaches by utilizing an interpretive ethnographic methodology of inquiry (Geertz, 1973). As Marcus (2000) points out, messy texts "insist on an open-endedness" (p. 567) and the ethnographer acts within the landscape of the study. Thus, as reported earlier, the focus grew organically from the tensions and discussions around the freedom of an open-ended project during which students were encouraged to be creative and divergent while working

collaboratively. To capture and reflect on this, a mixture of semi-structured interviews and a short questionnaire were designed for use with the participants at the end of the module.

A small selection of eight from the overall group of 44 final year Education and Early Years students voluntarily agreed to become part of this research. It is important to stress that the data was all collected *after* the module had been concluded and marks allocated. This negated any potential impact of students' disclosure to the module tutor who conducted the research. The positive aspect of this was that the interviewer had also observed and organized the module. Ethical clearance for the study was given by the relevant HEI, and the students were all aware of the purpose behind the research and understood their rights to withdraw at any time. The researchers recognized the principle of informed consent, and they insured all participants signed letters of agreement for their participation and also understood the implications of this (Oliver, 2010).

The interviews contained five standard questions which addressed the following: how easy they had felt it was to engage in the Reggio process; how they had worked as an individual and as a member of a group; and how they felt about having to work together in this way. The semi-structured nature of the interview provided the interviewer with access to individually constructed interpretations, providing "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1973) and emotive responses. The interview informality also provided opportunities for flexibility, allowing the interviewee to move freely from one topic to another and produce a wealth of thematic data. This enabled conversation with a purpose (Dexter, 1970). The interviews lasted around half an hour to an hour, and they were conducted in an informal place that was convenient to the student.

The questionnaire comprised the English version of the Generalised Self-Efficacy Scale (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995). There were seven different types of questions on the questionnaire (Youngman, 1982), of which 'ranking' was one. The students all ranked how they had perceived their self-efficacy and were asked to place how they perceived their ability to deal with different situations in a rank order from 4 (high) to 1 (low). The comments ranged from how they managed solving difficult problems to how they handled whatever came their way.

### Thematic Analysis

Using an interpretivist approach provided the interviewer with an opportunity for a thematic data analysis that was inductive, developing naturally out of the research. The analysis was conducted using the pedagogical themes of Reggio Emilia, as reported above, to attribute meaning to

the thoughts and behaviors of the students, as revealed in the interviews and questionnaire. In this respect, the study sought, through the open nature of its categorization, to construct, as well as to illuminate, the ideas that emerged from the data collected. There were several themes that emerged and re-occurred during the interviews with the students. These ranged from working within a group in a collaborative manner, not feeling as if ideas or thoughts were listened to, not enjoying the freedom of creativity, and finding the place of documentation as a formative rather than as a summative tool.

The data collection was concentrated in a very short time scale (a week) immediately after the completion of the module, which ensured that collection and analysis did not become a long drawn out process and was as simple as possible. There was no analysis of any of the data until after all interviews had been completed. It was important to draw credible conclusions while remaining aware of how interpretations of the data might be compromised (Sapsford & Jupp, 1996). Thus, the main findings are supported by actual and detailed quotations from the interviews in order to provide a solid foundation for the discussion with which they are intertwined. These quotations are presented in italic script.

### Findings

#### **The Struggle to Become a Reggio Emilia Learner: "It's a dark place."**

There were tensions even at the initial stage of visiting the museum, with some of the students questioning the relevance of the visit, asking couldn't they just get "on with it." After the initial visit they were encouraged to work collaboratively in small self-chosen friendship groups. They had to share and discuss their ideas and find a negotiated pathway to work together. From this point on the sessions became workshops, and the tutor became a combined pedagogista and atelierista. These sessions were open-ended with students choosing if to attend and in what capacity they required support. However, giving the students such freedom also provided some with the opportunity not to engage. Their reasoning was that the "process" was not going to be marked and therefore was not worth the effort, as it did not contribute to their final grade. However, their lack of engagement often provoked tensions with other members of their groups.

The module the students were studying expects that them to be independently engaged and motivated to learn and question ideas. Learning outcomes require the students to critically reflect and critically review research evidence about different international preschool environments. However, some students lacked confidence in their ability to take charge of their

own learning to achieve this level of critical review. Siegler and colleagues (2010) term this as “low perceived academic self-efficacy” (p. 357). Whitebread (2012) also notes the learner’s belief about the importance of the task, its relevance, its level of interest and difficulty will impact upon their “goal-orientation” and their “metacognitive performance” (p. 145).

As a possible explanation for this phenomenon, Alexander (2013) comments that from 1988 to 2010 policy makers and government in England focused on school curricula which “effectively equates with what is prescribed, tested and inspected” (p. 10). Lumsden, McBryde-Wilding & Rose (2014) also highlight this, stating that the school curriculum has had “a focus on core subjects, foundation subjects and testing” (p. 12) and that “performativity and target meeting have been the norm” (p. 14). In their research into transition issues from secondary schooling into the university, they note the difficulties students (post formal curriculum) have in adapting to a different type of learning. They refer to problems with learning to learn (Wingate, 2007), when students struggle with creative methods of learning or in non-traditional styles. Interestingly, despite the fact that students were in their final year of a university program, they had not felt pressure to change long established approaches to learning. As an illustration of what all of them felt, one student in our study stated:

There was a lot of pressure, and we were being asked to do like a radical thing, people felt uncomfortable because there was no comfort blanket, which is being told what to do, like it was different to what I originally been used to doing in a degree.

### **The Hundred Languages of Creativity**

Students’ perceived fear of creative freedom was noticeable in several ways. Some students struggled with being given the autonomy and freedom to be creative and develop their ideas in an open-ended way. For example, one student said the following:

I thought at first the idea was to choose something you can go with and develop the idea yourself. It seemed attractive, you know when you are sitting on the other side of the fence and you’ve never had that before, the idea you think on, I’d like to do that that. But when I was actually in the process of actually having that freedom, it shook; it shook the ground for me. It didn’t feel comfortable; it didn’t sit well because I think the pressure because it was the final year.

This almost visceral sense of fear resonates with House’s comment (2008) that “practitioners are forced

to think about children in an anxiety-fuelled, relentlessly ‘developmental’ way which constricts the space for children to just be” (p. 10). Gray (2014) in his lecture on the decline of play suggests that there is a growing focus on a “schoolish view” similar to that of “school readiness” (DfE, 2014, p. 5). Gray says that this suggests that “adults know best” and ensures a “continuous erosion in children’s freedom and opportunity to play.” The implication of this adult-directed, goal-oriented approach is a focus on a product rather than a process. However, the documentation involved in this project embraced the *process* rather than the finished product, which was viewed negatively and initially misunderstood by the students as they struggled to understand how to utilize the open-endedness of this tool. Rather than using a Reggio lens on formative assessment, the students focused on a summative one, for example:

We used it more as evidence – summative...I had to get Reggio to fit me. I tried to adapt it to meet the outcomes.

Robinson (2009) suggests that within our curriculum, literacy and numeracy are seen as hierarchical subjects leading to a “need to evolve a new appreciation of the importance of nurturing human talent along with an understanding of how talent expresses itself differently in every individual” (p. xiii). Alexander (2013) draws a similar parallel, stating a limited and narrow curriculum that focuses on core subjects is effectively “at a stroke severing the learner from history, culture and some of humankind’s principal ways of making sense and acting on the world” (p. 7). The creativity of the project was that it was not being marked per se but was providing material for an assessed presentation. However, rather than embracing this opportunity to widen their talents culturally or creatively, the lack of direct assessment caused anxiety within groups, and some perceived the project as an unnecessary inconvenience. For example, one student made the following comment:

They just wanted to do the minimum possible because they didn’t think it was being marked, essentially.

### **The Partnership of Collaborative Learning**

The Reggio Emilia approach is “child-originated” (Edwards et al., 1998, p. 240), and the centrality of these principles was firmly located within our students’ projects. Reggio children discuss and negotiate meanings and move together into a level of shared awareness and understanding through trusting partnerships. However, most of the university students saw group working and collaboration

during the process as a difficulty, making comments such as: “I like being in control of my own work”. This seemed to develop out of the feeling that it was a “waste of their precious time,” especially knowing that the process had little emphasis on the final grade. The following is an example:

“It was difficult - people were concerned about the outcomes of their individual experience and it did really impact upon the learning as a group of students and so many times I actually said ‘we are in a faculty of education, leisure and community’ and it didn’t sit together well.”

Another apparently negative aspect of collaboration and working in a group was not being valued or being listened to. Again, within the pedagogy of Reggio Emilia, there is a deep, strong desire and recognition of not just listening to, but also understanding each other’s words or ideas. There is recognition that this openness can lead to a conflict of ideas but this is acknowledged as part of a process “where speakers constructively confront each other, experience conflict, and seek footing in a constant shift of perspectives” (Edwards et al., 1998, p. 241). However, in contrast this conflict of ideas caused a lot of tensions within the groups of students, as one student noted:

I made a conscious decision to not come with a completed design, as I felt it sort of contradicted the idea of collaborative working.....I kept saying plans are being made in individual ways but I kept on saying we need to actually have this conversation ... So the project work was decided. I was trying to sort of encourage people to have that conversation because the product was decided .....but I didn’t understand why we weren’t having that conversation.  
But they wouldn’t actually listen to me, to my reasoning behind why I had done what I’d done.... which was so frustrating and that was the biggest tension in the process.

There also appeared to be a certain expectation, because of tuition fees, that the lecturers and the university should have provided all of the necessary resources, such as “a sheet with a tick list of things I have to do,” to support students to achieve their assessment. This was magnified further after the details of the assessment for this module were initially explained, and there was a sudden rush of frustration because of differences from how students had been assessed in the past. They made comments such as, “Why are we being asked to do it ourselves?,” and, “We’re paying the lecturers to teach us, not for us to teach the lecturers, if that makes sense.”

Students also struggled to embrace the Reggio open-ended learning approach, with comments such as,

“I’m not learning anything,” and, “What is the point of it?” They seemed to view the project through a target and performativity lens rather than a Reggio-inspired lens. However, during the interviews all of the students seemed to rank themselves as having a high self-efficacy (scores of either 3 or 4), even though they had struggled to undertake a project that required them to be creative and work in partnership and negotiate from the beginning. In hindsight, the questionnaires should have been completed by the students at the start of the process while they were in the process of struggle. It seemed at that point that their educational histories impacted upon their belief that this style of learning was too difficult and beyond their understanding. This was evident with the real depth of despair voiced during the interviews, during which one student commented, “It was dark. I didn’t know which way to go with it.”

Although positive aspects of the process were not initially noted, upon later reflection there was an overwhelming sense from students of recognition of how it had either developed them as reflective practitioners or given them a better understanding of viewing and listening to children. There was also a sense of recognizing how others in the group had supported them or that they had not actually listened to them. Finally, there was an awareness of how, within a social pedagogy, the interaction and trust between groups, individuals, and the environment is a fundamental aspect of this style of democratic learning, in contrast to the predefined goal-orientated style they were used to. With regard to collaborative learning one student voiced: “We all put our own different strengths into making it,” and, “The more we went through the project, the more we ended up scaffolding each other.”

As for recognizing the rights of the child in the process of learning, one student noted that children should “go where their learning is and when they want; they don’t have to be doing anything at a certain time,” and, “They should be in charge of their own learning.” It was universal that reflection of students’ own experience had made them “see” differently that children’s learning can be centered “around their ideology and pedagogy rather than just drilling them.... The 100 languages, it’s important to use all of them.”

### **Into the Light as a Reflective Practitioner: “Everything is Reggio Really”**

Initially this research was to understand why our early years students fought against a style of learning that was so embedded into the social pedagogy of European early years provision. Through these interviews it was apparent that both the students and the tutor (interviewer) reflected on the journey, thus providing both knowledge and understanding which empowered all learners and

developed a community of learners. Within Reggio Emilia preschools, the child and teacher are co-constructors and co-researchers, meaning that all views are valued, discussed, and shared. As there is no hierarchy within Reggio, there is a strong democratic thread which ensures opportunities for unguarded conversations (Baskerville & Goldblatt, 2009) and a shared responsibility of practice. Children work with their knowledgeable other (Vygotsky, 1978) to think divergently and challenge preconceived ideas, while these are scaffolded (Bruner, 1960). Comments from the students demonstrated an awareness of the importance, not just of a strong social constructivist approach but also a place within the learning for reflecting-in-action and on-action (Schon, 1987), for example:

It taught me to think about why you do stuff and to be more open minded and not just focus on a percentage, on that piece of paper. Doesn't just focus on the end, but how you're getting there, how you're going to do it, rather than having to plan an end . . . just see here it takes you?

This appears close to the authentic Reggio approach that supports a community of learners and develops critically creative thinkers who find challenge in conflict of ideas. One student stated: "It has been the most thought provoking, it has been the best module I've done in my degree, the most challenging. It was a very emotional experience." At the end of this process the students individually presented their "journey" from their perspective and reflected on the process. Mostly they recognized that they had learned not only a lot about a pedagogy of listening, but also a lot about themselves as learners.

### **Conclusion**

This research suggests that policy makers and educationalists could embrace some elements of the Reggio Emilia outlook on learning in order to promote creative and divergent thinking. Rather than the English EYFS view of getting the child ready for school (DfE, 2014), or indeed a view of the student as getting ready to graduate, we could provide contexts for learning that build "confidently on the enormous perceptual and cognitive powers and motivations of children ...to probe deeply into areas that interest them" (Gardner, 2001, p. 27). By providing multiple opportunities to think, investigate, experiment, and challenge, and by allowing time for reflection and dialogue along the journey, children and university students can develop a strong self-belief in their ability to climb any mountain in front of them. Whitebread (2012) reminds practitioners that the emotional and social environment

is also a crucial and powerful factor in cognitive ability. Real active learning is a social activity that engages communication, questions, and involves collaborative learning and negotiation. The Reggio Emilia approach "compels the children to seek cooperative strategies" because of the "deep roots of cooperative culture and organization" (Vecchi, 2001, pp. 178/9).

In an English higher education system that students note as having priorities such as "the grades being pinned on that" or learning that has a lot of "individualism and competition," even the idea of being creative and having freedom to try different "languages" of learning was not seen in a positive light. It was viewed as "radical" and brought feelings of low self-efficacy evidenced by comments such as, "I can't do art, not really, I can write but I can't paint, art, music anything like that." This provokes the question as to whether the focus in education right through from early years to higher education has become a system of "authoritative consensus" (MacNaughton, 2005, p. 30).

In Wales (in contrast to England) there have been signs of a move towards a more play-based pedagogy in the early years. As mentioned earlier, Maynard and Chicken (2010) who were worried over the "perceived over formalization of young children's learning experiences" (p. 29), piloted a small scale study to encourage Welsh early years practitioners to explore the Reggio philosophy in practice. However, similar to our findings with students, their research exposed the teachers' entrenched approach to be "dominated by prescribed subject-related outcomes" (p. 29), even when they had been given total support and freedom to explore and utilize the hundred languages. Thus, the teachers, like our students, struggled to let go of their teacher training theories and previous educational histories: as one of our students noted, "Well, I suppose that's the way the university always works; you just kind of get lectured at." This suggests that government, policy makers, schools, and universities as a whole must embed more co-constructing cognitive pedagogical interactions; as another of our students noted, "There are not many opportunities to sort of engage in projects.... This is more wholesome." The evidence of this study demonstrates that if students are given more opportunities to develop "wholesome projects," they become more confident, cooperative and, importantly, self-reflective and critical co-learners and ultimately can become Reggio-inspired co-constructors. As one student commented: "I have learned how to reflect in teaching.... Otherwise you have teachers who think very narrow-mindedly. Before this module I would have been exactly the same - here's this, here's that .....now it is about understanding what you are doing- the journey rather than the end result."

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