DEVELOPING CHILD INITIATED PEDAGOGIES TOWARDS DEMOCRACY AND PARTICIPATORY PRACTICES IN FORMAL EARLY YEARS SETTINGS – THE CASE OF ENGLAND

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Whilst democracy and human rights are fundamental values that are promoted by the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of the Child, the European Union and the Constitution of the United States, there is an absence of research studies that examine what democratic and participatory practices might look like at the level of everyday practice in early years settings. Child initiated pedagogies - young children’s collaboration with teachers and a genuine and shared exchange of ideas between children’s and adults’ world – relate to the broader, global educational goals and aims as well as typically local school policies.

Young children’s own interests and motivations in early years contexts are often neglected and subsequently what unites a diverse range of early years teachers and researchers in Europe and the USA is the concern for the absence of child initiated pedagogies. In addition there is very little research evidence on what would count as child initiated pedagogy as an everyday aspect of young children’s participation in a formal school context.

This paper draws on a larger, longitudinal research study in four countries (England, Finland, Estonia and the USA) where early years teachers investigate their own practice and focus on child initiated pedagogies with their classes of 3-6 year old children. The study is informed by socio-cultural approaches, neo-Vygotskian perspectives and post-developmental theories. In this paper child initiated pedagogy is accepted as resting on the process of co-construction of learning experiences between children, adults and the environment. The approach developed in the town of Reggio Emilia, Northern Italy, serves as a convincing and possible model of early childhood education, and as such it also serves as a source of hope and inspiration.

The data and analysis presented here come from two participating schools in England. Adopting an ethnographic approach 10 teachers collected data in their own classrooms and used field notes, reflective diaries and video recordings of their own pupils discussing their learning activities and experiences. The early analysis suggests that child initiated pedagogies work towards open democracy and is needed to combat undemocratic drives in early years practices in England today. The paper concludes in calling for more spaces for young children’s own thoughts, motivations and life experiences to be included in all daily activities and suggests some possible ways forward.