

## Keynote 1 (MOCEP)

### FIRST HAND EXPERIENCE: UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES

#### Introduction

(introductory remarks+ plan of the presentation – see abstract)

#### Section 1

In this first section I'm going to look at the choices that educators have to make when we consider what kinds of experience are most appropriate for young children, what sorts of experience lead to worthwhile learning. And I'll make the assumption that a good way to judge the quality of the experiences we provide is by looking at the quality of the learning that they stimulate. I'm going to start the discussion with two stories, both about apples and orchards, and both of them true.

#### Story 1

One beautiful morning in September, I went to visit a primary school (for children aged 3 to 11). I hadn't been there before and had difficulty finding the right way in – so I wandered around the building for a few minutes, looking for the main entrance. I discovered that the school stood in an extensive orchard; there were apple trees, pear trees, plum trees, quinces and peaches. The trees were laden with fruit, and the long grass in the orchard was full of fallen apples, pears and plums. So as I walked about, I began to imagine what I would see inside the school: I imagined the smell of cooking, and the children busy in the cookery area, making apple pies, stirring the bubbling plum jam; I imagined the study of fruits that would be going on, with the children using lenses and microscopes to look carefully at the different specimens they had collected in their orchard; I imagined the beautiful art work that would be displayed, the paintings and drawings and modelling of the fruit. But I was disappointed. The windows were closed, the blinds were drawn against the autumn sunshine, and the children were working on their prescribed topics, paper and pencil activities to support their work on The Victorians (in one room) and The Egyptians (in another). Not a fruit to be seen. The 'indoor curriculum' of the school excluded the outdoor curriculum of the orchard, the living world.

## Story 2

This story comes from a class of 4 to 6 year olds in a small rural school. Early in September, one of the children, whose mother worked at a local apple orchard, came to school with a basket of apples. The children were delighted, and wrote to thank the mother; they wondered if they could visit the orchard? Of course the answer was ‘Yes.’

So off they went, armed with clipboards and drawing materials. The trees were laden with fruit, of many different varieties. The children were fascinated by this variety, the range of sizes and colours, the names of the different types, and, of course, the different tastes. They were encouraged to sample the different kinds, and discussed their opinions of the sweetest, the ripest, the juiciest. After the tasting, they started to draw; they drew individual trees and bits of trees, they drew trees in rows, and in the course of exploring the orchard they found a row of beehives. The orchard owner talked to the children about the bees and the pollination of the apple blossom. The visit ended with the children buying fruit to take back to school for cooking and further study.

The following days were apple days. The children cooked apple pies, enough to share around at the school dinner time; they made apple jelly, and clay pots, fired and glazed, to hold the jelly. They studied the parts of the apples, they recorded their observations in drawing and clay. They measured, chopped, mixed, baked and strained the apple juice through a jelly bag: they were actively engaged, purposeful, collaborative and capable.

Why am I telling you these two stories? Not just to emphasise the poverty of the provision in the first school, but to celebrate the richness of it in the second: the richness that children experience when they encounter – with the whole of themselves – the smells and sounds and tastes of the world, the autumn sunshine and the warm scents of the orchard. Furthermore, I invite you to recognise and celebrate the richness of the children’s learning in the second school: learning about life and growth and the cycle of the seasons; learning about the apples, the parts and the whole – peel, core, pips, stalk, flesh and juice; learning about the connection between apple trees and bees and pollination, the cycle of fertilisation and growth; learning about the raw and the cooked, the pies and the jelly; learning about the variety in the world and its inter-connections – no apples without bees; learning to work together for a common meaningful purpose – chopping the apples, rolling out the pastry; learning that they

are active members of their local community, agents in their own learning, acting on the world, making sense of it for themselves through their purposeful activities.

Meanwhile, in the first school, surrounded by the empty orchard, standing neglected, uncared for, ignored, there was, of course, learning going on. But it was a very different kind of learning, the kind of learning that one important English writer on education calls '*learning by swallowing.*' This is learning in which little bits of knowledge, carefully prepared by the teachers, are dropped into the open mouths of the passive obedient pupils, who swallow the knowledge that their teachers have chosen to feed them. The pupils in the first school had no first-hand experience to feed their learning – only second-hand paper and pencil experiences and the words of their teachers. They could look at illustrations in books and posters, stuff from the internet, they could listen to their teachers, but they couldn't get their hands on anything from the real living world.

### Story 3

Let me give you another example, from a small-scale evaluation study I carried out a few years ago. With colleagues (local headteachers), we were looking at the quality of children's experiences in the classes for the youngest children (4 and 5 year olds) in a sample of 50 schools. And because the study took place in the spring, just before the Easter holidays, every school was doing something connected with eggs – since eggs have great symbolic significance at this time of the Christian year. But of the 50 schools, only two were using real eggs – chicken's eggs, duck eggs and goose eggs, eggs to be broken open and examined with lenses and microscopes, eggs to be cooked with and eaten, eggs to be investigated with hands and fingers and eyes and tongues. First hand eggs, from the living world. And in the other 48 schools, the children were making Easter cards to the teacher's design, using paper and card, pens and crayons, formulaic representations of eggs.

What's the moral of *this* story? Once again, all the children in all 50 schools were learning something. Nobody was learning nothing. But some children were learning through experience of the real world – real eggs in this case – and others were learning through experience at second hand, making identical representations of eggs with paper and other materials – tissue paper and cardboard, materials that don't really tell a 5 year old child very much about an egg. The children were handling the materials to be sure – so in that sense it was a hands-on opportunity. But hands-on isn't enough in itself for really worthwhile learning. I'm

suggesting that children's learning is most worthwhile when their experiences are real life experiences.

So I hope that the answer to my original question: 'what kinds of experiences should we choose for children?' is becoming very clear. We should choose experiences that entail authentic, hands-on contact with the real world and recognise the principle that these experiences, which lead to worthwhile learning, are a necessary and significant element in our programmes for young children.

Furthermore, I'm arguing that children need a wide range and diversity of experience. My own observations, over many years, in many different settings, suggest that in some settings, some of the time, we screen out aspects of the world that we would do well to welcome in. We shut the classroom windows on the world, we screen out the sights and sounds of the orchard, and thereby narrow the range of children's interests, the extent of their enquiries. It's a serious problem.

A good example of this problem for us in England is the question of snow. It doesn't snow in England as often as it used to do, so for some 3 and 4 year olds, when it does snow, it may be the first time they have ever seen snow. But some schools and settings do not take advantage of this amazing opportunity, but close their doors on the snow, and keep the children safely indoors – where they are warm and dry, certainly, but locked away from the incomparable experience of snow up close, underfoot, in your hands, in your mouth – snow in all its beauty and all its textures and colours. So while in one nursery, children are out in the snow, with shovels and buckets and wheelbarrows, in another, the children are indoors, safe and sound, and, in my view, impoverished.

So my argument here is for width and diversity of experience – and a good way of thinking about this approach, for me, is with the word 'generous'. It's a word used by the great English educator, Susan Isaacs, who was the principal of an experimental school, the Malting House, in Cambridge in the 1920s. It was an extraordinary school, and I will tell you more about it tomorrow; today I just want to use the phrase 'a generous environment', which is how Susan Isaacs described the environment she and her colleagues created at the Malting House – an environment that recognised the diversity of the world's resources, and which acted as a springboard for children's learning, a springboard from which they could launch themselves into the richness of the real world.

## Section 2

Let me move on to another kind of choice we can make. We can choose how to think about the children with whom we work.

We all know that our children are biologically young, and physiologically immature – and this may suggest that they are also intellectually weak and immature and incompetent. *Or* we can choose another way of thinking, and conceptualise children as rich, strong and powerful. Not materially rich, not physically strong or politically powerful, but rich in ideas and invention, strong in feeling and in friendship, powerful thinkers and explorers of the world.

This is a way of thinking about children which we have recently come to associate with the pedagogy of the educators in Reggio Emilia, a city in the region of Emilia Romagna, in the north of Italy. Here's a typical passage from the writing of Carla Rinaldi, who was for many years the Director of Services for young children in the region.

The cornerstone of our experience is an image of children as rich, strong and powerful ... They have the desire to grow, curiosity, the desire to relate to other people and communicate ... they are eager to express themselves...

Those three words, rich, strong and powerful, seem to encapsulate so much of the Reggio philosophy; you'll find them over and over again in the pages of their publications and hear them whenever a Reggio educator stands up to speak in public ( ref. to Mara K here?)

Why is this an important choice for educators to make? Let me explain: my argument is that the ways in which we think about children has a significant effect upon the ways in which we educate them and care for them; our conception of what children are like, what kinds of human beings they are, reads out very plainly into our provision for them. If we categorise them as immature and incompetent, we will resource and organise our settings in particular ways, offering them an undemanding curriculum, without risk or challenge. Whereas, if we take the opposite view, we will match our curriculum, our pedagogy and our resources to the strong and dedicated learners who will flourish in our settings, indeed, do more than meet our high expectations of them.

So, for example, if we think of children as natural born story-tellers, with considerable narrative skills, as people who love stories, we will respond to their enthusiasm by offering them the best and most engaging story books that we can find. In contrast, if we think of them as people who do not know the names or the sounds of the letters, we will provide drill and practice programmes in basic phonics. It is not difficult to predict which of these two approaches will be most rewarding for them.

Now for some illustrations of these two ways of thinking, these two different mind-sets, and the choices that follow from them.

As you probably know, in England we have a very strange approach to the assessment of young learners, both formal and informal assessment. I won't go through all the details of what we are constrained to do because it would make me too unhappy, but I do want to show you examples of some of the assessment instruments that I have seen in use.

I've selected just two examples to illustrate the kinds of thinking about children that they embody. And then I'll explain why I think that these kinds of thinking may have very serious consequences for children.

Here, for example, is an extract from a five-point scale for assessing children on entry to school:

- Numbers (a) no knowledge  
(b) numbers 'parrot fashion'  
(c) counts objects to 10  
(d) knowledge of ordinal number  
(e) competent handling of numbers more than 10
  
- Colour (a) no knowledge  
(b) limited knowledge  
(c) knowledge of primary colours  
(d) knowledge of a range of colours  
(e) knowledge of rainbow/spectrum
  
- Alphabet/reading skills  
(a) no knowledge  
(b) knowledge of letters out of sequence  
(c) phonetic alphabet 'parrot fashion'  
(d) recognises isolated letters  
(e) reads simple words

Forget, if you can, the impoverished view of what literacy and numeracy are *for* that is implied by these scales, and think instead about what these measures, and others like them, are saying about young children. The authors of this instrument (who have gone into print, in a refereed journal, to describe their invention) seem to think that there are, somewhere near their schools, ordinary 4 year old children who have ‘no knowledge’ of number, of colour, or of the alphabet. These categories fly in the face of everything we know about the learning of young children, who have spent the years before they enter school in a world alive with colour, and groaning with print and meaningful numbers. It is simply impossible for us to imagine children who have failed to learn anything about these aspects of the world. Unless, of course, we choose to think of children as ignorant until taught, incompetent until schooled, and woefully empty until filled with knowledge by their teachers. This schedule portrays children as poor, weak and helpless, rather than rich, strong and powerful.

Another example from an assessment tool measuring a child’s capacity to communicate: the first item focuses on the child’s ability to follow instructions, and is scored on a three-point scale.

## LISTENING AND TALKING

### 1) UNDERSTANDING INSTRUCTIONS

- (a) Cannot follow instructions when addressed individually
- (b) Can follow a single instruction when addressed individually
- (c) Can remember and follow instructions

Once again, we see an alarmingly low level of expectation of what young children know and do, this time in terms of listening and talking, activities that we know children engage in from birth, with fabulous achievements to be proud of, long before they enter school. But in this ‘deficit approach’ to children, the emphasis is on what they cannot do and do not know.

The incompetent, ignorant children suggested by these schedules, are very different kinds of human beings from the ones that Carla Rinaldi and her Reggio colleagues write about, and whose learning they document. They document children’s curiosity, their desire to know and relate, their desire to express themselves – and so much more.

Let me tell you about one powerful child I learned about from his teacher, who was a Diploma student of mine some years ago. She was a member

of a group of experienced teachers who were studying children's learning, and they became interested in what the children themselves knew about learning, and went back to their classrooms to find out. And this particular teacher worked with 4 and 5 year olds, and she thought to herself 'Well, they won't have much to say about learning!' But she was in for a surprise. The very first child she approached with her formal question: 'What is learning?' stood up very straight and tall and answered loud and clear, 'Learning,' he said, 'is what I do.'

Now here we see a strong child, who knows he is a strong child, and a powerful learner, with something important to say. And here is an image from Reggio Emilia, which shows, according to the child who created it, 'brains exchanging ideas'. A powerful image indeed and one which for me most beautifully illustrates the principle I'm proposing here, the principle that children are powerful learners, people who do and think and feel and find out for themselves, and whose learning deserves to be taken seriously. If we don't recognise children's capacities in this way, if we close our eyes to their strengths, like the authors of those gruesome schedules, we will never be able to do justice to the learning that children are capable of.



### Section 3

In this final section of my presentation, I return to children, and the choices we make about the ways in which we motivate children. Now, as we know, it isn't difficult to motivate young children – and this, in a way, is part of the problem. Little children are very good to adults, on the whole. Just as we are good to them, they are good to us. They do like to please us. And sometimes this is a very good thing, and sometimes it isn't.

There's an interesting – and challenging - study of children entering school by a researcher called Mary Willes. Her account of her findings is in a book called *Children into Pupils*; she describes what she saw when she observed, for herself what happens to children in their first few months in school (which in England means in September of the academic year in which they turn 5). So she was watching 4 and 5 year old children – spontaneously active, curious, independent – and she saw how they learned to be *pupils* and act in a pupil-like way. And there's one sentence in the book that tells us what she saw in a very shocking way.

Finding out what the teacher wants, and doing it, constitute the primary duty of a pupil. (Willes 1983, p183)

When I show this quotation to English educators, they say, Oh, come on, she exaggerates. Well, maybe, but only a little. She has good hard evidence, which she has analysed. And she has seen, with her own eyes, children working out that classroom rewards and classroom harmony depend on their conforming, willingly, to the established routines and rituals of the teachers. Find out what the teacher wants – nice, kind, benevolent teachers, all of us. And do it. And then of course the teachers will be happy, and pleased, and will tell their pupils so. So that's one kind of motivation, good for pupils, but not so good for autonomous, adventurous, inventive learners, the rich, strong and powerful learners we were thinking about earlier.

There is another kind of motivation, which starts not with the teacher, but with the children, and with what we know about them, and with what we know about what matters most to them, even more than pleasing their teachers. And one of the best ways of putting this knowledge comes once again from Susan Isaacs, who writes of

the child's spontaneous impulse towards understanding ...  
the thirst for understanding springs from the child's deepest  
emotional needs and is a veritable passion.

Now we are in a position to make an informed choice about motivating children. We must work in ways that are in tune with children's spontaneous impulse towards understanding. We must work with children in ways that feed this thirst for understanding.

Understanding what? Why, everything in the world, and everyone in the world, and all the places and spaces in the world... Not just the material things in the world, the stuff of the world, but also the big important *ideas* that are rich in meaning for them, the ideas that matter to them, the ideas they care about. And the word 'care' is important here.

That's one reason I like Susan Isaacs' way of putting it. She recognises that children's understanding isn't an affair simply of intellect, a cool process of cognition; it is an emotional affair; it is a passion in them, to find out more. Understanding *matters* to children.

Now I want to show you the cover of a book of which I am co-author, which builds on the propositions I've been making this morning. As you can see the title is in two parts: *First Hand Experience* – and I've said quite a bit about the kinds of first hand experience that we – the authors – are advocating for children. The second half of the title - *What matters to children* - echoes what I've just been outlining. So what *does* matter to children? Can we define it in ways that will be helpful for us as educators? Here's how we try to do it in the book.

## WHAT MATTERS TO CHILDREN

- what is in the world
- who is in the world
- touching and tasting the world
- acting on the world, making a mark on it
- being with friends
- finding out about different kinds of places
- exploring the world of living things
- understanding how the world works
- making sense of the world

So now we can go back to the idea of choices. If we choose, in our provision, in our organisation, in everything we do and say, to give children opportunities to explore *these* things, these ideas that matter to them, then they will be truly engaged, committed, passionate. They will be intellectually engaged *and* emotionally involved. They will do magnificent learning.

Now it's nearly time to conclude. I've presented three principles, which, I maintain, will help us make choices that will result in committed learners, doing worthwhile learning.

- the principle of authentic hands-on contact with the real world as a necessary and significant element in early learning
- the principle that children are powerful learners: people who think for themselves
- the principle of intellectual engagement and emotional involvement: what matters to children.

These three principles are at the heart of our book – of which I'll now show you a kind of map, laying out what's inside it, as a way of indicating the themes we'll pick up tomorrow and explore more fully:

- big ideas
- children's thinking
- children's questions
- children looking and listening

And we'll also look very closely at this phrase 'FOOD AND EXERCISE', which we use as a metaphor for children's learning.

It's a long time since we heard about any actual children, so I'll conclude with some images that demonstrate the kinds of learning I've been talking about.

#### Story 4

These last images are deeply unseasonable; we'll look at some passionate learners at Christmas, studying the big ideas of Christmas. Now Christmas is a festival that's even bigger than Easter in English popular culture, and it's celebrated in the streets of our cities with glittering decorations, and our mythical Father Christmas who rides through the night sky in his sledge drawn by reindeer, and by an orgy of buying and selling in the shops. But in one school where I taught, we chose to look at rather different ideas, at the meaning of the first Christmas and the birth of baby Jesus in Bethlehem. And it seemed to us that the big ideas in this view, the ideas that matter to children, are the mystery of birth, the strength and power of motherhood, the weakness and vulnerability of babies. In short, we invited the children to study mothers and babies. I'm going to show you some representations in which children expressed their growing understanding of these big ideas.

This shows a clay model, which was done from life; the mother of a very young baby agreed to act as a life model: she sat on the floor of the classroom with her tiny baby on her lap, and this is how a 5 year old boy responded, in his chosen medium of clay.

The next is a pencil drawing also from life, a drawing of the tall girl who was to play Mary in the school nativity play, drawn by a 6 year old friend of hers. Only a few lines, but the dignity of the image, and the gravity of the pose, are, I think, remarkable.

This pastel drawing is a different interpretation of the same experience, a different pose, with a different medium, but achingly beautiful, in my view.

But my favourite is the clay model; I see this as the creation of a child working in clay with a proper purpose, which is to try and understand some really important ideas, ideas you'll recognise from the list I showed you earlier. He's exploring the questions of what is in the world, and who is in the world, recognising that these aren't trivial little details, but profound issues, worthy of careful study. Birth is in the world,

motherhood is in the world, tenderness is in the world – and these children had the experience of studying these ideas slowly and quietly, at very close quarters, as close as we could get them to the mystery of birth. I hope you'll agree that this is a fine image on which to close, a testament to the intellectual and emotional engagement of this young learner and the quality of his first hand experience.

Thank you for listening.

MJD workshop notes for translator for 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> afternoons  
Workshops for MOCEP conference

## **Powerful children: powerful thinkers Parts 1 & 2**

### Part 1 Saturday May 26

In this workshop delegates will explore and discuss

- the richness and diversity of children's thinking
- the need to take a 'credit approach' rather than a 'deficit approach'
- the times and spaces in which thinking children flourish.

#### Discussion activity 1

I will present brief (visual) examples of two powerful and highly divergent thinking children and invite discussion about the quality of their thinking. What words would delegates use to describe what these young children are doing?

These descriptions will be used to establish the concept of the 'credit approach', looking at what children *can* do rather than at what they cannot do. I will provide counter examples of the contrasting 'deficit approach'.

#### Discussion activity 2

I will provide three short written examples of children's thinking (Handouts 1 – 3). Delegates will be invited to work in small groups, discussing the qualities of each, taking the 'credit approach'. The contributions of each small group will be used in a general, whole group discussion.

#### Discussion activity 3

Moving on, delegates will be invited to consider the factors in these three examples that have helped the children to be 'rich, strong and powerful thinkers'. What part does the children's environment play in developing children's thinking?

#### Conclusion

I will bring the workshop to a close by summarising the thinking that the delegates have been doing, and by re-emphasising the main points that have arisen, including the distinguishing characteristics of the 'generous environment' that supports children's thinking: time, space and attention; experiences that matter to children.

## Part 2 Sunday May 27

In this workshop, delegates will explore and discuss the adult's role in supporting children's thinking. They will consider the question: What do thinking children need from their educators?

### Discussion activity 1

Delegates will be invited to think back to their own experiences as children, thinking and learning about the world. What factors supported and encouraged their thinking? What happened to confuse or constrain them? What factors limit or close down children's thinking?

### Discussion activity 2

I will provide a variety of descriptive material, including two short written examples (Handouts 4 & 5), to illustrate the main points of the preceding discussion, showing how thinking children need:

- interesting and important things to think about
- to be taken seriously
- to be trusted
- feedback from their educators
- time and space to play.

I will conclude the workshop with some remarks about Piaget's short and sweet summary of the place of play in children's learning:

**'Play is a form of thought.'**

Please note: the text for Handouts 1-5 will follow shortly.