

THE IMPORTANCE OF INNOVATION

By Wendy Ellyatt

I have been thinking about creativity and innovation and how important these are for our ability to fulfil the needs of the future. Both rely on being given the freedom to 'think out of the box', to take risks and to experiment with unconventional approaches.

Over the last two hundred years some of the most exciting and innovative advances in Early Years thinking have come from such free-thinking pioneers. Some were not even originally educators, but started in very different careers. For example Frederick Froebel was studying architecture at Frankfort-on-Main when he was persuaded by a friend (who was fired up with enthusiasm about Pestalozzi), to take a post in a school. And Maria Montessori was a scientist and medical doctor until her work led her to explore the development of young children. Other pioneers such as Steiner and Malaguzzi were already working as educators and only came to focus on the early years as a result of unexpected opportunities that were presented to them.

'These women were cleaning bricks near the river, so I asked them what they were doing,' he remembered. 'We're making a school,' they answered, and that's how it all got started. The women asked me to look after their children. 'Our children are just as intelligent as the rich people's children,' they said proudly, asking me to teach their children enough to give them a better chance in life,' Malaguzzi recalled with a smile. 'I told them that I had no experience, but promised to do my best. 'I'll learn as we go along and the children will learn everything I learn working with them,' I said.'

Loris Malaguzzi

If we look at the work of Steiner, Montessori and Malaguzzi, all three became aware that young children had enormous capabilities and sensitivities that could be compromised by the intervention of the adults in their environments. All three lived at a time that there was little governmental interest in the area and were therefore able to develop their theories free from external restrictions. In a way they all acted more like scientists than educators because they allowed the children to follow their natural instincts rather than serve an external adult imposed agenda of what childhood 'should be'.

'Instead of us teaching the children using a slow and boring step-by-step process, we try to let them begin and solve complex problems on their own,' Malaguzzi said. 'We must credit the child with enormous potential and the children must feel that trust. The teacher must give up all his preconceived notions and accept the child as a co-constructor.' You need to have 'a willingness to question all your own abilities, your knowledge, to become humble. Only then will you be able to listen to the child, to set off on a common search, to 'educate each other together'.'

Wolfgang Atchner, Malaguzzi's Obituary, The Independent, April 1994

'We cannot know the consequences of suffocating a spontaneous action at the time when the child is just becoming active; perhaps we suffocate life itself.'

Maria Montessori

We have much to celebrate about the fact that the Early Years is now recognized as being a stage of particular importance in the development of young children, and that the UK has been leading the way by providing substantial and sustained investment in the sector:

“The UK invests more per child than other countries (except Austria, Iceland and the United States) at the pre-primary level (at USD 6 420, unit spending is considerably higher than the OECD average spending per child of USD 4 888... This is all the more impressive given the fact that, while increasing spending levels since 1998, the rate of participation of 4-year-olds and under as a percentage of the 3-to-4-year-old population also increased from 51% in 1998 to 90% in 2006.”

2008 'Education at a Glance' Report produced by the
Organisation for Economic Development (OECD)

It has also been at the forefront of core research in the area with the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) project producing rigorous and persuasive data on the powerful effects of pre-school on children's progress and development.

With this investment however, has come a range of measures designed to ensure that the spending has been clearly and empirically justified and that there are systems in place to monitor and evaluate the outcomes: Early Years policy-makers now consult and quote from a wide range of government commissioned research and statistical reports; the Early Years Foundation Stage has been created to assure parents that they can be confident that the services provided for their children will be inspected against government accepted standards in care and early education; It is now a statutory requirement that all all schools and registered early years providers in the maintained, private, voluntary and independent sectors had to use the EYFS; we now have the new *Progress Matters* to support leaders and managers in monitoring children's progress across the EYFS. The materials include a Progress Matters booklet, a Progress Matters e-learning course and a progress monitoring tool designed to help leaders and managers review how well children in their setting are developing over time.

In the same way that all advances in science come from the ability to think beyond what is currently considered possible, advances in educational thinking need the same kind of freedom. If we start constraining all settings to adhere to too rigid a norm we run the risk of stifling pedagogical creativity and innovation and that is a very dangerous development. For example many parents in the UK choose to send their children to Steiner or Montessori schools because they feel very strongly about the underpinning philosophies, and yet both are compromised by the nature of a statutory framework.

Educational diversity brings a richness of provision and level of parental choice that is highly valued elsewhere in the world. In the USA the Charter School Movement has been very successful with nearly 3,000 new schools launched since state legislatures began passing charter legislation in the 1990s. And more than a decade ago Sweden reversed its long history of centralised school administration to allow parents to choose the type of schooling that best suited their children.

“The beauty of the system is its opening up for diversity; a thousand flowers are allowed to bloom. Gone are the days when educational offerings flowed from one grand, conformist plan meant to fit all, but inevitably failing to do so. The current school diversity reflects the fact that children are moulded in quite different shapes. Religious schools, pedagogy-based schools and schools with different profiles have been started. Ideas that would not have otherwise been tested are now realities”.

Frontier Centre for Public Policy – May 2005

It is wonderful that the Early Years is now seen to be of such importance and that the UK is leading the way. We need to be careful however that, in our very English pursuit of outcomes and standards, we do not create such tight and rigid systems that we constrain the inspirational pedagogues of the future.