

Working in Environments of Enquiry

ReFocus/QCA
conference
July 2007, York

the summer conference marked the 10th anniversary of the first showing of the Hundred Languages of Children exhibition in England. It was this exhibition which began the ongoing encounter with the values, ideas and work of the preschools of Reggio Emilia. The conference was a collaboration between the ReFocus Network and QCA, who are increasingly interested in working together.

Carlina Rinaldi, President of Reggio Children opened the conference with an emotional and provocative speech on the subject of 'Children as citizens with rights' drawing on her experience from Reggio Emilia as an example of sustained, local, innovative practice, in which the nature of meaningful learning and teaching has been an ongoing focus of exploration for more than sixty years.

Mick Waters, Director of Curriculum QCA spoke to the audience about his desire to create a 'world class curriculum' and 'making learning irresistible' for children. He also talked about the QCA's interest in finding meaningful, innovative practice, what it might be and how it might be promoted and supported.

There were several presentation from early years educators in the ReFocus network, who are striving to develop methodologies which enable an environment of enquiry, supporting children's dispositions, imagination, relationship and expression. They are working hard to develop tools which make the children's learning visible to the many interested eyes of the adult world. The examples of this work were at the heart of the conference.

The conference explored the theme of innovation and asked some key questions:

- What do we mean by meaningful learning?
- How can 'environments of enquiry' support these kinds of learning?
- How do we promote and sustain value-driven, principled innovations?
- What are the obstacles to these kinds of innovation?
- How can innovative practices be securely focussed on the interests of children and their meaningful learning?
- How can the pursuit of rising standards be married to our core values and principles, to our aspirations for children?

Other speakers included:

Kate Gooding, Senior Inspector for Wolverhampton LA.

Writers and researchers, Mary Jane Drummond, Professor Peter Moss.

Photographs by Chris Holmes

Top: Carlina Rinaldi – President Reggio Children

Middle: Mick Waters – Director of Curriculum QCA

Bottom: Participants



Making Learning Irresistible

Mick Waters, Director of Curriculum at the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority shares his reflections on the conference and his hopes for a curriculum that inspires and challenges educators and children to make learning irresistible from early years through primary, secondary and beyond.

A world-class curriculum

At QCA our goal is to develop a modern, world-class curriculum that will inspire and challenge all learners and prepare them for the future. Wouldn't that be fantastic, to have every single child buzzing with the excitement of learning, feeling successful, growing in confidence and developing as an active and responsible citizen? Successful early years practice is vital if we are to achieve this.

For me, this conference confirmed a number of parallels between the aims and characteristics of the work of the ReFocus Network and those of the curriculum division at QCA. In particular, both share an emphasis on working with partners to develop a learning community which, by offering a national forum for exchange of ideas and dialogue, promotes innovative approaches to education, and respect for children and their ideas.

In her opening address to the conference, Professor Carlina Rinaldi, President of Reggio Children, emphasised that today, as much as sixty years ago when the first Reggio schools were set up, we are living in a changing and challenging period. The world has changed and it's not turning back. How can schools prepare children for this world? Today's children have not known a world without the internet. It is estimated that pupils in school today will have had ten to fourteen different jobs by the age of 38. We are currently preparing students for jobs that don't yet exist, which will use technologies that haven't been invented!

Young people represent humanity's future. So what could be more important than the curriculum we choose to lay before them? The ongoing challenge is for everyone involved in education to work together to develop a curriculum for the 21st century that will give all young people the skills, knowledge, understanding and personal qualities they need to flourish.

'The curriculum cannot remain static. It must be responsive to changes in society and the economy, and changes in the nature of schooling itself.'

NATIONAL CURRICULUM HANDBOOK: WORKING WITH PARTNERS

At QCA we are increasing the scope of our collaborative activities with partners. In the past year, we have talked with and listened to thousands of people: head teachers, teachers, employers, ministers, organisations from Ofsted to Oxfam and, of course, learners, about the future of learning. Those who contributed to this debate told us that the curriculum needs to respond to:

- changes in society and the nature of work
- technological developments
- new understanding about learning
- the need for greater personalisation and innovation
- the increasing international dimension to life and work

They told us that a curriculum fit for the 21st century should help to achieve the aims of the Every Child Matters agenda and should be flexible and adaptable to meet the needs of all learners. Many that we worked with also stressed the need to place greater emphasis on developing skills and competencies and on personal development. The curriculum, they agreed, should be exciting and enjoyable and directly relevant to young people's lives.



Many of the opinions gathered during the past year are captured in the publication '1000 words to shape the future.'

'A 21st –century curriculum should promote enjoyment of living, learning and play.'

PRIMARY HEAD TEACHER

'The foundation stage emphasises choice and autonomy as well as developing social skills and the same is true of post-16 education but content and control are too much the reality in between, resulting in demotivation and a sense of failure for many.'

EDUCATION BRADFORD

'Play needs to be reinstated as a form of creative expression across the primary age range; its erosion has diminished learning opportunities. Creativity is the springboard for innovation.'

LEEDS METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY

It was clear from the conference that ReFocus groups are growing in number and thriving in many parts of the country including North Somerset, Black Country, Birmingham, Manchester, Cambridge, Tyneside, Bath and Bristol, Herefordshire, Newport, Buckinghamshire and London. In a similar way, we at QCA have also established a network of over 80 co-development groups who are turning ideas into actions on the ground. These groups have sprung up where schools and settings have decided they want to work together to push their thinking further and share ideas for curriculum innovation. The approach that individual schools use often differs, depending on the needs of their children, but like the ReFocus groups, all share a passion for using their curriculum to make a positive difference to young people.

Each co-development network is a bit different. At the moment they include:

- Head teachers involved in the National Primary Heads Association (NPhA) in the south-west of England.
- A group of ASTs in the East Midlands.
- Entire local authorities, for example Bristol.
- Over a hundred school leaders involved in the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) leadership network.
- A virtual network of schools that are geographically isolated from any other network. These schools share their curriculum journeys online.

Working with groups of headteachers and experienced educationalists, QCA has also produced a draft of 'A Big Picture of the Curriculum' - a tool to support schools in developing their curriculum as the entire planned learning experience for young people. This was what I was keen to share with conference delegates in York. The latest version can be viewed at: www.qca.org.uk/17180.html or www.sightlines-initiative.com (ReFocus-Articles archive)

The point of a big picture is exactly that. We need to see a large landscape for children's learning with many different facets.

Too many in education believe that there is but one answer, a particular system, a particular technique, a particular approach, a particular resource, a particular philosophy. My point is that we need to be clear about principles for learning and organise lots of aspects effectively.

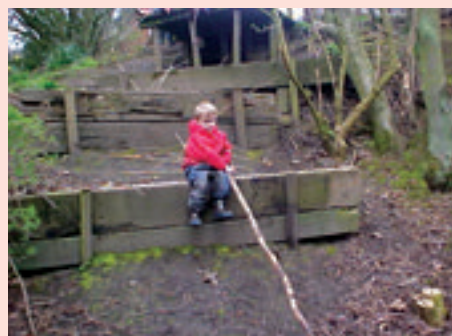
Systems to support Innovation

It is clear that many schools and settings are already working on innovative ways to transform learning in their schools and settings. Examples of these innovation stories can be found at: www.qca.org.uk/innovation/

Throughout the conference, teachers and artists from the ReFocus network demonstrated in workshops how they organised learning to provide their children with rich, creative learning experiences. At Walkergate Early Years Centre in Newcastle, for example, the children spend one day a week, regardless of the weather, exploring a wooded and marshy area at the Rising Sun Country Park in North Tyneside. Another project sees children work alongside a professional musician to develop creative dance ideas.

The children are closely observed by the staff, and their responses recorded. Back at the centre activities are planned and implemented to develop children's skills and interests further. The children are also encouraged to develop ideas themselves. Having improvised tools in the woods at The Rising Sun, for example they wanted to use proper tools at the centre, and devised their own 'Rules 4 Tools' to ensure safety.

The two Walkergate teachers told the delegates how these innovations have had a profound impact on the children's learning. They documented improvements in language development, in the children's ability to cooperate and solve problems, in their relationships with peers and adults and most dramatically on their self esteem.



Images: Children from Walkergate Early Years Centre, Newcastle upon Tyne.



'I have been helped to see what I can actually do rather than what I have been taught to do.'



'With some help I can achieve anything.'



'I can't explain it but it's something from your own heart, something that inspires you.'

A co-constructed curriculum

The importance of children and educators co-constructing their place of learning and curriculum came across loud and clear at the conference. This is also an important part of our work at QCA. Students of all ages including learners in the foundation stage have shared their opinions about what they are learning and what they would like to learn.

Kate Gooding, Early Years Advisor from Wolverhampton, remarked in her address, 'Children should be seen and heard.' In March this year this was certainly the case at a conference we held at a hotel on Rutland water for one hundred and twenty pupils aged 10 and 11. They came from across the country to engage in creative learning activities and give their views on the curriculum and how they learn best. They used computer voting buttons, video, and a variety of activities to give their often forthright views.

When asked 'What makes learning worth it?' this is what some of them said.

- 'I have been helped to see what I can actually do rather than what I have been taught to do.'
- 'With some help I can achieve anything.'
- 'I can't explain it but it's something from your own heart something that inspires you.'

These quotes from children, underline what Professor Rinaldi spoke of when she referred to schools as places where we educate the citizens of the present and future and where optimism and passion can be developed.

Every early years setting and school can build a curriculum that meets the needs and interests of young people like these, and those in the early years of schooling: a curriculum that inspires, challenges and enables a smooth progression from early years through primary, secondary and beyond. Professor Rinaldi also stated that on this learning journey what we want for all our children is 'nothing without joy'.

Joy could be seen on the faces of the children at Walkergate as they built shelters, explored the stickiness of mud and danced together to live music. Yet research from our work with co-development groups and NFER tells us that pupils' enjoyment of the curriculum decreases across the key stages. A head teacher recently told me about one of her very active, enthusiastic pupils who lived life to the full, was always asking questions and spent much of her time exploring the world by hanging upside down, climbing and turning cartwheels. She was not looking forward to secondary school because she thought it would be 'an end to cartwheels'.



Let's ensure that we make the experience of school from early years onwards a continuous, joyful cartwheel of enquiry and discovery.

Holly doing cartwheel on lawn

Mick Water's role at the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority is 'to develop a modern, world-class curriculum that will inspire and challenge all learners and prepare them for the future'. Previously, Mick was Chief Education Officer for the City of Manchester and worked in Birmingham Local Education Authority. Mick believes that the curriculum should be treasured and valued and that it needs to be shaped to fit with children's lives.