

Using Rhizomatic Thinking in Early Childhood Pedagogy to Avoid Making Other into Same

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Introduction

As early years educators many of us espouse a belief that all children are unique, but frequently enforce subtle barriers (often disguised as choice) to what we enable them to accomplish. Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) philosophy of thought challenges these parameters and has the potential to strongly influence practice and personal beliefs. Applying their concept of rhizomatic thinking to encounters with children and colleagues can offer fresh insights, adding greater depth and multiplicity of meaning. Olsson (2009, 26) observes that Deleuzian philosophy 'forces us to stop, and think about things in new ways' which in turn 'opens-up new regions for living' to 'see what was not seen before'. Therefore in this paper we would like to explore Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) understandings of thought and knowledge and the potential impact that rhizomatic thinking can have upon early years pedagogy and practice. In order to contextualise this debate it is important to remind ourselves of some of the existing influences upon current practice within early years education and care (ECEC) in the UK and also worth giving some consideration to international practice examples to provide alternative conceptions.

In their work Deleuze and Guattari (1987) make a clear distinction between thought and knowledge. They suggest that the concept of knowledge relates to classification, categorisation and identity. Once an object has been 'identified' there is no longer any need to engage with it, it becomes pre-set and familiar, constrained by its identity. Therefore knowledge construction or cognition becomes a linear, fixed process of building upon 'something' that is already known, toward a pre-determined end point. In contrast thought is seen as an active, self-creative force that evolves and re-evolves through diverse and unpredictable connections. Applying the metaphor of a rhizome Deleuze and Guattari (1987) suggest that thought has no beginning, no end, just a 'middle of things, with unlimited possible pathways (tubers) that open-up an ever expanding multiplicity of connections/directions.' Olsson (2009) and more specifically May (2005, 22) suggest that thought occurs when provoked by something unfamiliar, it considers that which is 'interesting, remarkable or important' within experiences and encounters. Hargraves (2014, 324) describes these visions of thought as 'the emergence of ever-branching interpretive possibilities' that do not ascribe to 'knowledge truths', but are constantly moving and evolving "creating thought anew with each act of knowing and thinking." The question this raises is to what extent these possibilities are enabled through our ECEC pedagogy.

Purdon (2014), Hedges (2014) and Hargraves (2014) all suggest that traditional understandings of developing knowledge stem from cognitive theory. Initially formulated on Piagetian (1951) constructivism, this theory proposes that children learn and develop their thinking by progressing through age-based stages of cognitive development. New knowledge, or information, is acquired and understood through the accommodation and assimilation of experiences, which are then stored as schematic structures within the brain. This image of knowledge acquisition lends itself to generalisations, classifications and scientific or reason-based conclusions and by doing so constructs knowledge in a linear and systematic fashion, defining what is objective and knowable within experiences and learning. Through this model children are subjectified by the binary logic of right/wrong conclusions and educator/child power inequities: you have knowledge and are therefore

powerful or lack knowledge and therefore powerless (Langford 2010). However Purdon (2014), Hargraves (2014) and Hedges (2014) claim that Piaget's constructivist notions were modified to take into account Vygotsky's social-constructivism and sociocultural theory (Rogoff 2003). Acknowledging interpersonal and community influences on learning, social interaction and symbolic tools (including language), provides a contextual viewpoint of knowledge construction that implicitly supports postmodern perspectives of situated learning. This perspective is adeptly represented in Honan's (2007, 535) imagery of pathways; the 'urban dweller' conceptualises a pathway as a 'fixed concrete structure...with an identifiable beginning and end', whereas the rural pathway is never permanent 'moving through bush, up and down mountains and across streams and rivers'. Both pathways are valid and represent 'truth' but they are experienced differently by the child or learner, depending on their prior symbolic knowledge and language of what constitutes a pathway.

These concepts of thought and knowledge have considerable impact on ECEC at both policy and practice level. ECEC is regulated in Britain by the EYFS framework (DFE 2014) which reflects current western-based ideals of rationalism, essentialism and developmental psychology. It embraces the 'school readiness' approach to provision, which Moss (2010, 2014) highlights as reducing the value and importance of ECEC to merely preparing children for later schooling in a undeviating fashion. As a consequence the EYFS (DFE 2014) has become increasingly standardised and regulated, with totalising and normalising one-size-fits-all approaches to policy and provision, that effectively 'writes' an officially sanctioned image of 'normal child and compliant educator' (Honan 2007 and Langford 2010). This embodies the Deleuzian (1994) concept of knowledge and 'dogmatic thinking' where developing thought is often confused with developing knowledge. Consequently children are conceptually expected and encouraged to re-tread pre-known paths, to meet predetermined outcomes, in a linear-like progression (Dahlberg and Moss 2005). According to May (2005), Olsson (2009) and Hargraves (2014) this hegemonic concept of knowledge construction is comfortable and unthreatening in its 'Sameness'; it attempts to grasp 'Otherness', diversity and difference and make it function as 'the Same'.

The impact of this on child development can be demonstrated through the analysis of the following activity observed in practice. The topic was fish, and initially the children (aged 3-4) experienced thinking about the fish from its primary, common sense classifications, as 'fish' or 'sea creature', and they explored its component parts closely under a microscope. The children's language externalised their growing understanding of the features and characteristics of fish such as 'scales, eyes, head, fin' as they systematically and logically explored what it was to be 'fish'. Some children went on to spontaneously sing '1,2,3,4,5', others took pictures of the fish or drew their own, danced like fish or created 'fish sounds' with instruments, as their cognitive accommodation of the fish became increasingly more representational and symbolic. At a surface level this activity was an exemplary child-centred learning experience. It acknowledged children's previous interest in sea creatures and considered many of the EYFS development strands and characteristics of learning. As the setting was situated within a fishing and farming community the activity fitted within their sociocultural paradigm, adding relevance and meaning from which the children could draw forth their 'lived in' experiences. The activity afforded the children opportunities to develop their own ideas and make sense of their world in a meaningful context, as required by the creating and thinking critically characteristic of learning highlighted within the EYFS (DFE 2014). But not only that, by using open questions and 'wondering aloud' techniques, the children's thinking processes were scaffolded, facilitating the co-construction of knowledge reminiscent within a pedagogic shared-thinking approach (Purdon 2014). However returning to reflect on the activity through a Deleuze-Guattarian (1987) lens, you can begin

to question this simple and rather transparent narrative as ‘thought which harms no one, neither thinkers nor anyone else’ (Deleuze 1994, 172). In line with a dogmatic thinking perspective the experience fitted into a common sense, implicitly subjective, pre-defined journey that represented the kind of thought that ‘everybody knows, no one can deny’ (Deleuze 1994, 172). Many of the ‘diverse’ pathways that the children could have taken to explore the fish, in a semblance of ‘freedom’, were actually predetermined and equipped, in an attempt to pre-empt the differentiation of expression that the children might manifest. However does this truly represent ‘the free and individual child’s’ journey of autonomous thinking, or as Langford (2010, 117) suggests, is it instead typical of the illusion generated by the impacts of child-centred pedagogy? The trap that many early years practitioners fall into is to take potential for ‘Other’ and make it function as the ‘Same’. By pre-planning a range of responses we fail to offer children the opportunity to engage with the encounter in an un-predictable way, we curtail opportunity to allow for the different, the interesting or the remarkable.

Reflecting on activities from a Deleuze-Guattarian (1987) perspective enables a concept of thinking where knowledge generation becomes negotiable, not codified by what and how to learn. Discursive discourses underpinning the EYFS (DFE 2014), such as unique child principles, child-centred pedagogy and developmental psychology often, as Langford (2010) suggests, place educators in an impossible dichotomous position of adhering to statutory requirements whilst simultaneously responding to individual children’s interests and needs. The encounters these discourses engender do not adequately address the complexity of children’s connections, meaning-making and ‘thought’ development. In contrast, from a Deleuzie-Guattarian (1987) perspective the child becomes a ‘nomadic’ explorer, with no fixed position or boundary, their connections constantly evolving and ‘becoming’ something new and unexpected. Reconceptualising practice and thought in this way acknowledges what is obvious but also uncovers what was once unseen, allowing new possibilities and questions to emerge (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

Dalli (2011), Hedges (2014) and Hargraves (2014) discuss how developing multiple meanings through rhizomatic thought can be better facilitated in an open curriculum such as New Zealand’s Te Whariki (Ministry of Education 1996). Dalli (2011) considers this framework a curriculum of possibilities that allows educators ultimate control over content and delivery, therefore tailoring it to cultural, historical and geographical values inherent to each specific setting and community. Furthermore, according to Hedges (2014) and Hargraves (2014), one of the indicative principles underpinning Te Whāriki are ‘working theories’, which are mini theories that implicitly and rhizomatically combine together when children make connections between their relational experiences. Hargraves (2014) suggests that traditional understandings of working theories were primarily constructivist in nature and then adjusted to reflect the theoretical bases of social-constructivism and socio-culturalism. Although on the surface similar in nature to the EYFS approach, the lack of codification through developmental psychology and the national emphasis on cultural identity rather than schoolification, suggests a greater freedom for educators within the working theory approach.

Hargraves’ (2014) research followed a group of children in New Zealand trying to make sense of the recent localized earthquakes. Through role play, mixed media activities and dialogue opportunities the children explored and developed their thinking and knowledge of earthquakes. They looked at books about them, recreated them with shaking tables, built houses with blocks and discussed how to make them strong enough to withstand the table shaking. Although such activities in themselves bear close comparison to the fish activity previously discussed, Hargraves (2014) concluded that when

attempting to make sense of the children's complex relational connections, constructivist and sociocultural theories were not sufficient to accommodate the complete picture. By dismissing the restrictions of knowledge-truths and applying a rhizomatic thinking approach to the children's actions, Hargraves (2014, 325) uncovered examples of thought that were 'created anew with each act of thinking'. These examples fashioned a 'rhizomatic web' of reflections that added greater depth to her practice interpretations. Hargraves reflected particularly on one boy's verbal representation of his connections and meaning-making about the earthquakes. The child discussed the fixed characteristics of earthquakes that had been made available to him, interspersed with representational thoughts of 'other dangerous situations', such as 'monsters and sharks punching out of the ground' making the earth shake, alongside more logical conclusions of tsunamis and floods, which also 'make you wet and muddy' (Hargraves 2014, 325). Hargraves concluded that sociocultural-based working theory adequately provided the context for the boys experience but the articulation of his thought process was more diverse, unpredictable and congruent with rhizomatic thinking. No-one could have foreseen the connections in the boys thinking therefore his rhizomatic journey was completely unique in nature. Reflecting on rhizomatic encounters can provide a temporary window into much more complex interactions that are neither fixed nor defined.

Dewey (1910, 12) suggests that deep and complex reflective thought is not about 'thinking harder' but 'thinking differently.' Stratigos (2015) demonstrates the benefits of this by re-analysing her research into belonging; through a Deleuze-Guattarian (1987) lens of assemblage and desire. Initially Stratigos' research considered a sense of belonging through a toddler's acceptance into the older children's bear cave. The toddler had been perpetually refused entry and each time dissolved into tears and immediately looked to the educator to intervene. Eventually the toddler gained access to the bear cave with educator support and spent time playing with the other children, in a seemingly happy ending and with a growing sense of belonging. However, by rhizomatically problematising her thinking through assemblage and desire, Stratigos (2015) reconceptualised her perceptions of the encounter to think differently and uncover what was not seen before. According to Deleuze and Guattari (1987) assemblages are metaphorical structures created through the complex connections and relationships between social interactions, materials and artefacts, time and place. Their connections are ephemeral in nature, constantly evolving and adapting in a 'process of becoming', creating new possibilities of meaning. Encounters within these assemblages generate "feelings", which in turn creates 'desires', these become "productive forces that form relations between aspects of assemblage" (Stratigos 2015, 49). Upon reflection, Stratigos felt she had originally held many pre-conceptions of this encounter that had promoted a dogmatic thought image of events. By predetermining the beginning and end point of the experience, her observations had merely confirmed her hypotheses, much like the fish activity. Her initial image of the toddler was that he was needy, passive and powerless, whereas the older children were powerful and competent. However reconceptualised through the lens of desire the binary concept of belonging or not belonging was challenged, inequitable concepts of power were challenged and the toddlers tears became his expression of the effect of the assemblage, a desirous act of 'powerfully and productively influencing his world' (Stratigos 2015, 49). Therefore Stratigos' image of the toddler was transformed to rich, capable and competent child within his own learning, using emotion to manipulate others and achieve his own ends.

Developing this level of rhizomatic thought within our reflective practice can transform the ways in which we provide for and respond to individual children. For example, by reconceptualising a child's distress at first being left in the setting using a Deleuzo-Guattarian (1987) lens of assemblage and desire, can reveal an empowered 'other' view of the child. This process can enable the practitioner to

re-imagine expressions of anger and sadness; transforming the image from the 'deficit child', to the 'rich and competent child' expressing resistance and rebellion at being left behind. This child is not helpless, this child uses her own desire to productively influence her world. Analysing experiences through rhizomatic thinking illuminates the fact that all versions of thought and knowledge development function as if true, they just follow different pathways of the rhizome. Furthermore from a Deleuzio-Guattarian (1987) standpoint the key to transformational practice, is not just to accept the existence of multiple meanings, but to understand that however contradictory they appear, they all function as truth simultaneously. Accepting this multiplicity of meaning behind encounters with children, thereby seeking out the 'remarkable, interesting and important' rather than looking for 'truth', will, as previously stated, impact on the way that educators respond to and plan for individual children. Rinaldi (2006) and Moss (2010) note that as we move away from linear and subjective concepts of knowledge and thinking we actively choose ways to combine practice observations, theories of development and pedagogical texts. Honan (2007, 535) observes that removing the subjective linear layers promoted by dogmatic thought and reified curriculums, leaves a 'map of possible pathways' that allow the 'potentially contradictory to be encompassed with ease and pleasurability.' This has the potential to 'create a world that is more democratic, more genuinely plural, more just and less unequal' (Moss 2010, 13).

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