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Can we have an international approach to child-centred early childhood practice?

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Increasing interest in the provision of early childhood education and care services as a social investment strategy has been accompanied by worldwide concerns to identify appropriate pedagogical practices for working with young children. Here, we trace the developing interest in child-centred approaches, before considering whether there can be shared understanding of the term between countries with different histories of early childhood provision. Case studies of England, Hungary and Italy consider focus group and questionnaire responses from staff and students on early childhood courses, together with curriculum guidance, to examine 'child-centredness' in the context of the cultural-historical background to early childhood provision in the three countries. Findings suggest that the term 'child-centred' has rich pedagogical associations that can be easily subsumed into different value systems prizing, for example, individuality, child development or democracy. In the light of these findings, we consider the implications of the use of the term 'child-centred'.

Keywords: child-centred; pedagogy; child development; comparative; curriculum

Introduction

Internationally, there is increased interest in the provision of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services because of their potential social and economic contribution to the lives of children and their families. The growth in interest has sharpened the focus in policy and research on the environment, staff qualifications and pedagogical practices within ECEC settings. Here, we are particularly interested in pedagogical practices and specifically the widespread interest in child-centred pedagogies. The term 'child-centred practice' is used internationally (Fleer, 2003, p. 66) but is likely to be shaped by local discursive frameworks concerning childhood. Chung and Walsh (2000) identify three strands of child-centred practice: a perception of the child at the centre of their world, a developmentalist view of the child at the centre of their learning, a democratic view that a child should direct their own learning. Each approach is based on a different set of values and draws upon different theoretical understandings of the child and child development.

We will look at why there is an interest in child-centred approaches, both pedagogically and politically, before going on to consider whether there might be a shared

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understanding of the term between three countries: England, Hungary and Italy. We present case studies of Higher Education (HE) institutions offering early childhood (birth to eight year) degrees in the three countries. The case studies include focus group data from HE staff and students and questionnaire data from students. We then develop the case studies by analysing curriculum guidance documents, exploring connections between these and the views of those becoming early childhood practitioners and the lecturers supporting them, and relating the data to the three strands of child-centred practice identified by Chung and Walsh. We conclude by considering how child-centred practice plays out differently in the three countries in our research, depending on current and historical constructions of the child in political rhetoric and personal meaning-making.

The international interest in ECEC

Interest in ECEC services internationally has been motivated by the drive towards social and economic equality centred on facilitating access to employment for parents (mainly mothers) and promoting equality of access to the developmental advantages of ECEC services for children. ECEC has thus become an international social investment strategy (White, 2011) focussing on returns in the here and now in relation to parental employment, and future returns from enhanced child development outcomes. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), World Bank and European Union all advocate ECEC as supporting child development and creating the foundations for acquiring human capital. This interest from supra-national organisations demonstrates the extent to which ECEC has become globalised and the focus on human capital acknowledges the importance of performance in the global knowledge economy.

Investment strategies recognise the need for high-quality services (see Penn, 2011), and pedagogical approach is an important aspect of quality. Child-centredness is often mentioned in connection with quality (e.g. Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden, & Bell, 2002) and both supra-national organisations, such as UNICEF (2014) and The European Commission (2011), and international aid agencies (Tabulawa, 2003) promote the use of child-centred pedagogies. Many national governments also advocate child-centred pedagogies; Bertram and Pascal (2002) in their international review of curricula found a common theme of child-centred approaches, and Grieshaber and Ryan (2005) concluded that child-centredness is an enduring and fixed entity in ECEC.

Chung and Walsh (2000), examining how the term ‘child-centred’ has developed in the US context, have identified three strands of understandings of child-centred practice:

- The perception of the child at the centre of their own world. This is closest to the Romantic view of childhood with its origins in Rousseau’s and then Fröbel’s thinking.
- The developmentalist view of the child at the centre of learning, in contexts which have been organised so that development can happen.
- The progressive/democratic view that a child should direct their own learning, informed by the emergence of the importance of children’s rights.

Each approach upholds a different set of values and draws upon different theoretical understandings of the child and child development.

Child-centredness is not, however, a new concept. Although Fröbel (1885) has been credited with inventing the term 'child-centred', the concept had been developing over the previous century. As childhood emerged as a distinct phase of life (see Postman, 1994, pp. 144–145), scholars considered how children move from childhood into adulthood, including how children develop and how best to support them in this development; the idea of a child-centred approach is discernible in Comenius's recommendations that children should be taught what is interesting and useful to them and in Rousseau's conception of childhood as space for children to develop unconstrained by the demands of society. Fröbel described children as at the centre of their worlds in *The education of man* (*Die Menschenerziehung*, 1885, pp. 97, 277):

> By this, in the period of childhood, [the child] is placed in the centre of all things, and all things are seen only in relation to himself, to his life.

Fröbel is describing here the first stages of childhood, a phase of development, rather than making explicit recommendations for child-centredness as a pedagogical approach. However, because Fröbel also 'believed that young children required special schooling to match their developmental characteristics' (Chung & Walsh, 2000, p. 217), his thinking appears to anticipate the developmentalist approach to child-centred pedagogy which emerged during the last century and beyond. Fröbel's writing therefore includes within it support for the second developmentalist conception of 'child-centredness' identified by Chung and Walsh, even though Fröbel's own understanding of development – as movement towards spiritual union with a divine being – is very different from later versions of child development. There is also the germ of the third understanding of child-centredness – the child as active agent – in Fröbel's conception of childhood as part of the continuum of development; if childhood is a time when children develop naturally at the centre of their own worlds, then they should be able to follow their own interests. The kindergarten was meant to be a garden *for* children, somewhere they could be active doing the sorts of thing that children of their age want to do.

The sudden ban on Fröbel's Kindergartens in his own country in 1851 led to many of his supporters leaving Germany and as a consequence Fröbel's ideas, including child-centredness, spread rapidly around the world (Georgeson & Campbell-Barr, 2015; Wollons, 2000, p. 3) and were often associated with 'alternative' ways of thinking (Brehony, 2000, pp. 61–62); child-centredness has a long history of being something different from established ways of thinking. Kindergartens soon appeared in many different countries, although their form, curricula and pedagogy were shaped by the particular cultures and concerns of their new contexts (Wollons, 2000). Chung and Walsh (2000) have shown how subsequent child-centred approaches were subject to different discursive formations in their use and interpretation. The result is a complex web of different theoretical viewpoints on what is meant by child-centred approaches and '[w]hen a concept is so variously interpreted it is difficult to sustain the argument that it is pivotal to the success of children's learning' (Stephen, 2010). Its meaning is often taken as self-evident, but because it is concerned with learning and development, understanding what 'child-centred' means must be informed by an individual's own epistemology, and so it is likely to be interpreted in the way that individual understands that learning and development happen. Borrowing from Vygotsky's distinction between meaning and sense, we argue that while dictionary definitions can offer words and phrases that point to its *meaning*, 'child-centred' will

have a different *sense* for each individual, built on their experience of the term. We will therefore consider the sense and meaning of 'child-centred' through our analysis of the three case studies.

Methods

We focus on England, Hungary and Italy as three examples of countries that have long histories of early years pedagogy, but with different structures of early childhood provision and qualification requirements. All three would argue that early years provision in their countries is underpinned by child-centred philosophies, but there are different socio-political contexts framing these claims. They are therefore presented as contrasting cases. The focus on England (rather than the UK) is intentional because of the variations that exist in early childhood policy across the different counties that form the UK (see Selbie, Blakemore, Farley, & Campbell-Barr, 2015). We have adopted a case study approach to developing a detailed and intensive analysis of the views and opinions of tutors and students in three HE institutions (one in each country) about the attitudinal competences (European Commission, 2007) required for ECEC. We then build our case studies of the three HE institutions by locating them within the context of the early years curriculum frameworks that will shape and inform the working practices of the future practitioners. The case studies include both qualitative and quantitative data and, while limited in breadth of coverage, are designed to develop depth of understanding and to generate discussion about how pedagogical practice is framed in relation to the child-centred discourses outlined earlier. We will refer to the case studies by the name of the country, but it should be remembered that data were collected from just one HE institution in that country.

The case studies investigated the key attitudinal competences that HE lecturers and students would advocate for early years practitioners and any commonality across three European countries. One focus group with HE lecturers was conducted in each of the three countries and in total 14 members of staff participated in the three focus groups. We also conducted focus groups with 13 students across the three countries. In all instances, participation in the focus groups was voluntary with participants being invited via email and notifications in staff and student meetings. In designing questions for both lecturers' and students' focus groups, researchers drew on the European Commission's statement that 'Competences are defined here as a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to the context' (European Commission, 2007, p. 3) and asked what participants felt were the *attitudes* needed for early childhood practitioners in their respective countries. Participants were then asked if the attitudes might vary according to the age of the child, how they felt they taught/learnt about attitudes, what had informed their views and whether they felt there was anything unique about their respective country's attitudinal competences.

Transcripts of the focus groups were then analysed thematically using the principles of grounded theory. We coded the responses openly, allowing the data to determine the themes rather than imposing an existing framework (Creswell, 2012), although we recognise that our roles, experience and choice of questions in the focus groups would influence the codes chosen. As the focus groups formed the first stage of the analysis and would inform subsequent stages, we identified and coded all attitudes that emerged, not just those that were most frequent. Following initial analysis of all data, we returned to the transcripts to consider them in relation to strands of child-centredness as presented by Chung and Walsh.

Findings from the focus groups informed an online questionnaire that enabled us to 'test out' whether the attitudes identified in the focus groups resonated with a larger student group. The questionnaire was distributed to students via email in their respective countries, obtaining 216 responses. Students were asked to rate on a scale of one to ten (one being low) how important they felt the attitudes were, if they varied according to the age or ability of the child and where they learnt about them. The median, mode and mean were then determined for each attitude in each country.

We also used the coding framework from the focus groups analysis to analyse curriculum and guidance documents for each of the three countries. The first stage of the curriculum analysis was a keyword search. For example, we conducted word searches in the documents for appropriate translations of: child-centred (including child-centred, child-centredness and children's/child's needs). We then looked at the text around the words to develop an understanding of how the term was used. Following this, we read the documents to see if there were other sections that could be interpreted as indicating a child-centred approach. When other possible terminologies were identified, these were shared between analysts so that each country could replicate the search terms.

Respondents in each phase of data collection were provided with an information sheet that outlined the nature of the research and ethics protocol. Given the research was linked to the HE institutions where the students were studying, it was important to stress that participation (or non-participation) would have no consequences for their academic studies and (for both lecturers and students) that data would be treated as confidential and any identifiable information would not be reported.

In all instances, the data were collected in the native language of the respective countries. Focus group discussions were translated into English by experienced translators for the purpose of analysis. Document analysis was conducted in the native language and findings were then shared in English. However, the translation process has encouraged us to question further the notion of shared international meanings, as often translations had to be explained to reveal their full meaning.

Because the data are limited to focus group and questionnaire data from students and lecturers – those who are in the process of becoming early childhood practitioners and those who support them in doing this – and analysis of official documentation, the study does not capture the voice of early childhood practitioners, children or families, which would be worthy of research in the future. Although limited in breadth, the data nonetheless raise important questions about shared understandings of 'international' terminology.

England, Hungary and Italy: the context

Table 1 presents both commonalities and differences in the structure of early childhood services and those who work in them in the three countries, reflecting the wider differences seen internationally. These features will shape the nature of early childhood courses in HE and include adult-to-child ratios, qualification requirements and whether the children are assessed, features which could impact on child-centredness; even if all the countries advocate child-centred practice, there are questions about whether this might be inhibited by high ratios of children-to-staff, how qualifications develop understandings of child-centred practice and whether the assessment of children might be contradictory to the philosophical underpinnings of child-centred practice discussed earlier.

Table 1. Country overviews.

Country	Name of curriculum	Age group covered by curriculum	Page length of curriculum	Government responsibility & inspection	Are children assessed?	Who provides service?	Qualifications and age range covered		Child: staff ratio
England	EYFS[a]	Birth to 5	31	National, Ofsted[b]	Yes, under the EYFS at five	Private daycare, voluntary preschools and maintained nurseries	Under 2	Leader = Level 3, half of all other staff Level 2	1–3
							2	Leader = Level 3, half of all other staff Level 2	1–4
							3–4 in private/ voluntary sector	Leader = Level 3, half of all other staff Level 2	1–8
							3–4 maintained sector	Level 6 (degree)	1–13

Hungary	Óvodai Nevelés Országos Alapprogramja (ONAP) *Basic Principles of education in Kindergartens in Hungary*	3–6/7	10	Government: professional responsibility Municipalities or foundation or church: sustaining responsibility	Yes, at the age of six (school readiness as an exit test) The way of achieving this is written into the programme of the nursery	Municipalities or foundation or church	*Nursery School Teacher Training (BA)* Children of 3–6/7 years of age *Infant and Child Development (BA)* from new-borns to 3 year olds *Infant and Child Development (higher level vocational training)* Children between the ages of 0 and 3 years	2:25 1:12.5
Italy	Regional documents & normatives for nurseries National framework for the development of competencies in pre-primary and compulsory schools	3 month–3 year children in nurseries 3–6 year children in pre-primary	Complete framework: 68 pages Dedicated to pre-primary: 8 pages	Municipalities Regional offices for education (USR)	No No but teachers are asked to produce a report before the children enter the primary system	Municipalities, private State system, some municipalities, private	Under 3-year old children (Nurseries): different high school degrees; the most part of the staff have a tertiary level degree (Regional degree); some a BA in Education Older staff a high school degree; newly recruited staff a Master's in pre-primary education (4 years of study)	1:6 or 1:8 1: 28, if a child with disabilities is included 1:25

[a]DfE (2014).
[b]Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have devolved responsibility for ECEC, including their own inspection frameworks.

Understandings of child-centred practice

Child-centredness as an attitudinal competence was evident in all of the focus groups and received a high overall average score of 9.5 (9.7 in England, 9.5 in Hungary and 9.3 in Italy). Patience, enthusiasm and establishing rapport with families were the only other competences to consistently score an average of nine or higher in all countries. However, whilst child-centred approaches were explicitly named by lecturers in Hungary, in England and Italy being child-centred was evidenced by the importance given to focussing on the needs of the child.

> We believe that one of the most important attitudes is being child-centred. The early childhood practitioners have to be open for every child no matter his/her social, racial etc. background. (HE Staff, Hungary)

> As tutors, we recognise that students need to acquire the competence to identify needs when they observe a group of children; I mean they need to carefully observe the group of children in order to identify the needs, in order to establish a system of educational priorities, before action. (HE Staff, Italy)

> That kind of wanting people to feel passionate about the children and the needs of children; we talk a lot about being advocates for children and to kind of have that commitment to children and wanting to give them a voice. (HE Staff, England)

Lecturers' views about required attitudes – being child-centred, being non-judgemental of children, starting with their needs, irrespective of their socio-economic, racial or religious background – were therefore framed within an equality discourse, echoing Chung and Walsh's third category, the progressive/democratic version of child-centredness. In the questionnaire for students, as reported earlier, there was a high mean rating for meeting the child's needs, and this was also reflected in students' answers to questions about whether pedagogical practice should change as a result of the age of the child, with participants from all three countries feeling that, if you always start with the needs of the child based on their stage of development, then age is immaterial. Respondents did appreciate that practice might vary with age but this was not, however, the determining factor; rather it was the needs of the child that came first.

Comments on the needs of the child also reflected a sense of children being valued for who they are in the here and now – reminiscent of Chung and Walsh's first interpretation of child-centredness. In discussions in all three countries, this focus on the child as 'being' also acknowledged that child-centred practice should recognise the child being a part of a community. In some instances, such as in comments from Italy, this was a concern that those who work with children should be able to communicate with the child's family in order to build on what has gone on in the family and offer support if needed (which relates to the equality discourse). Lecturers in the English focus group felt that while practitioners needed to recognise the child as a part of a family, they also needed to accept that families do things differently. For Hungarian respondents, the interpretation of the child in the community was slightly different, in that they highlighted the practitioners' role in socialising children. However, they also acknowledged the need for practitioners to recognise the family's role in the socialisation process, again suggesting the need for early childhood practitioners to be able to communicate with families as part of focussing on the needs of the child. Working with families was also recognised as important in the students' questionnaire, with an average score of 9.3 across the three countries. The suggestion is therefore that

being child-centred involves responding to children's needs while being aware that children's needs will be shaped by their family and culture. Being child-centred is therefore about focussing on more than just the needs of the child, but rather the needs of the child-in-their-community. We feel that this extends Chung and Walsh's first category outlined earlier, incorporating into the Romantic notion of the child at the centre of their own world the idea of the child as a part of their family.

Building on these findings, we consider the constructions of 'child-centred' evident in the curriculum documents of the three countries.

From Table 2, we can see that references to 'needs' are most prominent in Hungary and this is also evident when looking in detail at their two curriculum documents. Crèches (sometimes referred to as nurseries) follow the Basic Principles of Education in Crèches in Hungary (2009). They are devoted to children's well-being and primarily seen as social (not educational) services that children attend if their parents study, work or are seriously ill.

Within the core principles, we can identify the child-in-the-family discussed earlier, as well as notions of equality in terms of respecting the individual child. Whilst this suggests possible tension between focussing on the individual child and the child-in-their-community, it is in practice more of a balancing act. Crèches look to support both children's holistic development and the educational activities of families with young children. Every child is assigned a 'fostress' who looks after him/her (e.g. feeding, getting changed, etc.) as a mother looks after her child. Crèches in Hungary, therefore, reflect a view of child-centred practice whereby practitioners focus on the needs of the child, irrespective of their background, whilst recognising that the child is a part of their family and wider community and with a strong emphasis on supporting children's development across a wide range of domains.

Attendance at Crèches in Hungary is relatively low in comparison with other European countries, but most children do attend kindergartens, which provide structured and guided development for children between the ages of three and six/seven.

Table 2. Search terms and number of occurrences in curriculum documents.

	England	Italy	Hungary
Document name	EYFS	General framework for the development of competencies in pre-primary	Óvodai Nevelés Országos Alapprogramja (ONAP 2012) *Basic principles of education in Kindergartens in Hungary*
References to:	Child-centred 0 Needs 35 Interests 5 Individual 13 (+2 for individuals) Equality 3 Play 11	Children's rights 5 Needs 5 Constructive (as a strategy of learning) 3 Unique child 2 Centrality of personhood 3	The word *child-centred a*ppears at the very beginning of the text and applies to the whole document Love 8 Play, playful 43 Movement 25 Needs 29

Kindergartens are guided by *The basic principles of education in kindergartens in Hungary* published in 2012 (see Eurydice, 2009; see also Nagy Varga, Molnár, Pálfi, & Szerepi, 2015, p. 119). This document deals with basic goals of a kindergarten such as supporting a healthy lifestyle, language development and moral and ethical education. Kindergartens are given relative autonomy in how to develop their pedagogical practice and this autonomy is reflected in the absence of requirements to record the development of the children for regional or national reporting purposes (as is the case in England).

Although a national document, the *Basic principles* can be interpreted at a local level so that pedagogical practice is developed relevant to the context, and this includes complementing the home learning environment and getting to know children so that activities can be developed that are appropriate to their needs, interests and community. Free play is a pedagogical feature; organised activities are not more important than play, although putting this into practice creates some difficulties. The focus on the needs of the child and the child's autonomy to lead their play-based learning also supports an inclusive approach to kindergarten provision where all children are able to access and attend services. The child as a part of the family is also reflected in kindergarten practice; for example, children and adults have their meals together. We can therefore identify ideas of child-centredness that reflect the child at the centre of their world and the progressive/democratic view that a child should direct their own learning.

The principles outlined for Hungary have some similarities with the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in England, where there is also a focus on play and child-initiated activities, but there are differences. The EYFS never refers to child-centredness directly. This might seem surprising, given its high rating in our questionnaire, but it is more understandable when we consider the current government's role in the production of the EYFS, and their hostility to the word. Not only did the education minster explicitly distance himself from the term (see Dooley, 2012), but the chief inspector of schools linked 'child-centred' with 'lefty' ideas and blamed declining standards on child-centred teaching (Paton, 2014). The wording preferred within the EYFS is the 'unique child':

> Every child is a unique child, who is constantly learning and can be resilient, capable, confident and self-assured. (DfE, 2014, p. 6)

Whilst only referred to once in the current version, it is a guiding principle of the EYFS. The focus on the unique child is framed within an equality discourse (echoing our focus group discussions) and elaborated in relation to a child development discourse. The focus on equality and development is reflected in another guiding principle:

> Children develop and learn in different ways and at different rates. The framework covers the education and care of all children in early years provision, including children with special educational needs and disabilities. (DfE, 2014, p. 6)

In addition to this, there are a number of places within the EYFS whereby practitioners are guided to focus on the individual needs of the child and to recognise that all children will learn differently. Careful reading of the EYFS reveals a strong vein of individualism – which 'creates a room full of individualised children responding to opportunities provided by unified authority' (Rix & Parry, 2014, p. 211), child-centred practice

without the sense of belonging to a community which we heard about in focus groups and is advocated in Hungarian guidance.

The pedagogical approach that the EYFS advocates for responding to the needs (and interests) of the child is a play-based curriculum, with children learning through play in a mix of child- and adult-led activities. Whilst it could be viewed that this represents valuing children as active learners by responding to their interests and allowing them to take the lead in developing their learning activities through play, the EYFS describes play as 'planned' and 'purposeful' (EYFS; 1.8), implying that it is shaped by adults' agendas. The pedagogical approach is also framed (if not bound) by a child development discourse:

> Practitioners must consider the individual needs, interests, and stage of development of each child in their care, and must use this information to plan a challenging and enjoyable experience for each child in all of the areas of learning and development. (EYFS; 1.6),

The EYFS document is supported by the non-statutory 'Development Matters' (Early Education, 2012) and linked to EYFS Profiles that have to be completed for every child before they enter formal schooling. The Profiles provide a summary of where a child is in relation to a set of predetermined learning outcomes. This reflects the role of early years services to lay the foundations for children's later learning, but also raises concerns that early years services are now answerable to school readiness agendas (see Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 24) and could consequently fail to capture all aspects of children's learning (Campbell-Barr, Lavelle, & Wickett, 2011). The focus on child development as progress towards the specified learning outcomes of the EYFS seems to contradict the third interpretation of child-centred, of children being active in developing their own learning trajectories.

In Italy, as in Hungary, there is a split model of nursery and pre-primary (kindergarten) provision. Provision for children aged from three months to three years is framed by a National Act (Legge n. 1044/dec. 1971) that establishes the general goals for the system of Nurseries and ECEC services. In its first article, it states that Nurseries are social services in the public interest (i.e. not for profit). The main goal of Nurseries is the provision of temporary safeguarding of children, the support of families in the education of their babies and young children, the facilitation of maternal employment, and contribution to social cohesion, statements that focus more on adults' needs. The Law also requires advanced professional qualifications of educators (art. 6) and the Regions have therefore established in-service and initial education programmes, with different theoretical and methodological approaches.

There are two main theoretical perspectives, both of which can be traced back to different interpretations of the work of Fröbel (Caruso & Sorzio, 2015, p. 37); *personalism* emphasises the 'uniqueness' of each person but, in contrast to the individualism identified in England, also emphasises human beings' intentionality towards virtue and the connections between persons and communities in supporting personal growth through care and proximity, more akin to what we found in the analysis of data from Hungary. Personalism is juxtaposed with *constructivism*, the children's attitude of active exploration of their environment as a process to develop their mental schemes, which in turn develops new dispositions to engage into new experiences. This perspective on ECEC derives from Piaget and therefore emphasises the psychological aspects of individual development. Following the Second World War and in reaction to the experience of fascism, some regions (such as Regio Emilia: see the later text) have

adopted a progressive/democratic approach to the education and care of young children (Caruso & Sorzio, 2015, p. 39). Elsewhere, a more conservative personalist approach is in evidence. There are undoubtedly tensions in the interpretation of child-centredness between the two approaches, but it is not possible to calculate the number of references to child-centred approaches (as outlined in the methods) in Infant-Toddler Education in Italy, since there are different Regional Frameworks and some regions have not yet worked on documents for ECEC provision for children from birth to three.

The Regions have the responsibility to define both the main objectives that should be pursued in constituting Nurseries and the standards for their evaluation, echoing the regional autonomy identified in Hungary. Therefore, many different approaches, professional competencies and standards can be found across the Italian territory. We outline two examples in the later text from Tuscany and Emilia Romagna, the regions with the most advanced systems of Nursery provision in terms of standards and diffusion and with more advanced perspectives based on children's rights to be educated and on the educational commitment to developing stimulating environments to promote children's active learning. Nurseries in these regions therefore adopt a progressive/democratic view of child-centredness, while also embracing elements of the developmentalist view of the child at the centre of learning in contexts that have been organised so that development can happen.

> *Tuscany*: in the article 10 of the Regional Guidelines for Early Childhood Education and Care (Nuovo Regolamento dei Servizi all'Infanzia, Regione Toscana, DPGR 41/2013) it is emphasised that each Nursery is constituted according to an explicit educational programme and the Municipalities are committed to the coordination of the educational services in their area.
>
> *Emilia Romagna*: Reggio Emilia is famous worldwide for its ECEC provision. The approach is based on the idea that children can develop their many symbolic competencies by collaborating in producing interesting artefacts, that become part of their environment and play a role in children's participation in their everyday practices and local community (see Caruso and Sorzio (2015) for more details). This approach is, however, very expensive and therefore cannot circulate widely in less powerful municipalities, particularly as the Reggio Children Foundation is careful to control of the use of the label'Regio Approach', to avoid the damage to its reputation from substandard practices in other situations opportunistically adopting the Reggio Approach. Along with other advanced experiences in Emilia Romagna municipalities, the Regio approach is reflected in local legislation in which (in contrast to other regions) nurseries are defined as 'educational and social services for children from three months to three years of age, characterised by a public interest. Nurseries are committed to the respect of the children's rights' (Legge Regionale Emilia Romagna (Regional Act) 10/01/2000 art. 2). Therefore, nurseries should respect children's rights to be educated, protected and develop their individual cultural and/or religious identity. The nurseries are committed to the inclusion of vulnerable children and to the prevention of social exclusion.

The general framework for the development of competencies in pre-primary and in the system of initial education, 2012, also promotes the rights of children from three to six in Italian Pre-primary schools to be educated, cared and supported, both in the development of their competencies and in their active participation in the wider society, according to the values expressed in the Italian Constitution and the Convention of the Rights of the Child. The general goal of instruction is defined by a positive interrelationship between 'culture, school, and person'. With this phrase, it is intended that the schools should mediate between the developing children, each considered as

'unique' person ('person' in the terminology of 'Personalism') and the culture, intended as the integrated system of human achievements, echoing earlier discussions of Hungary.

According to the *National Framework* (MIUR, 2012), the teachers should consider the uniqueness of each child and therefore they should recognise her/his identity, attitudes, capabilities and fragilities that characterise any stage of development. Therefore, educational activities should match children's need, desires and their inner curiosities towards phenomena in their environments, and should promote children's attitudes towards cooperation (MIUR, 2012, p. 3). And the final paragraph of the document asserts that:

> The [concept of] centrality of the person unfolds its full meaning if the school is an educational community, oriented to the larger human and civic community. (MIUR, 2012, p. 15)

Here, we see elements of the Hungarian system where the child is a part of the community and in the focus of the English EYFS on educational development.

This focus on development is also evident in the way the Framework maintains that educational activities should be organised around 'Fields of experience' (The Self and the Others; The Body and Movement; Images, Sounds and Colours; Words and Discourses; Knowledge of the World: Objects, Living Kinds, Numbers, Forms) that can promote the many competencies characterising individual well-being and active and democratic citizenship. Learning can be highlighted in relation to children's active engagement in their experiences in structured fields. The teachers are invited to focus on the constructivist attitude of children actively exploring their environment in the process of developing their mental schemes, as a way of acquiring meaning from experience and anticipating new dispositions to engage in new experiences.

Discussion

Different cultural understandings of children and childhood create different discourses that shape interpretations of child-centred practice, and this suggests it might be difficult to arrive at an international understanding of child-centredness. Table 2 demonstrates that, when looking across terms used in our three selected countries, evidence of a shared language to talk about child-centred practice is weak (although we acknowledge that this may in part be due to difficulties with translating terms). In focussing on the meaning underpinning the text it is, however, possible to identify some common principles; child-centred approaches are associated with freedom, learning through play and developing activities in response to the interests of the child (see Wood, 2007) and this is evident in our data.

The evidence about child-centred approaches from our analysis of the curriculum guidance documents in England, Hungary and Italy overlaps with comments from early childhood lecturers and students in our focus groups. The overlap is perhaps unsurprising, because our participants' understandings of appropriate pedagogy for young children will be shaped by their cultural contexts, which include policy requirements. There are elements of all the three strands of child-centred practice identified by Chung and Walsh (2000), but with a different balance between the three perspectives in the three sets of documents and the focus group discussions. All three sets of documents include a strong element of developmentalism; in England, in the EYFS and its

accompanying guidance Development Matters, it is the dominant perspective with the individual child at the centre of their learning, while the progressive/democratic concerns are prevalent in the Italian documents, but with the idea of the child-as-unique-person woven through, together with a strong sense of the child's place in the community. The Hungarian documents also foreground child development but, through their emphasis on play and children's autonomy, include strong elements of both other perspectives as well as the idea of the child-in-the-family.

There is evidence of the concept of the unique child in all three countries: the English EYFS explicitly identifies the 'unique child'; it is present in the personalism still present in Italian thinking; it can also be inferred from the need to observe individual needs before intervening in the Hungarian approach. The idea of the 'unique child' reflects an equality discourse, the notion of meeting the needs of the child irrespective of their ability or background, drawing on notions of children's rights. This can also support a democratic view of the child, when allied with a child-centred approach offering children opportunities to take the lead in their own learning. The developmentalist view too interacts with the idea of the unique child, in that practitioners respond to the interests of the child in a developmentally appropriate way.

Creating the balance between the different strands of child-centredness is a challenge for practitioners. In many instances, curricula (and the practitioners enacting them) weave together different perspectives on child-centred practice (Langford, 2010), responding to the needs of individual children in support of their development, whilst respecting their autonomy. The bringing together of developmentalist and equality discourses can offer an endorsement of a play-based approach to learning but, as Stephen (2010) points out in her critical examination of pedagogy's influence on early years practice, the 'Big Ideas' of play and child-centred practice are not always supported by research, despite their widespread currency amongst practitioners. There is certainly a need to take into account how the term 'play' might be used differently across countries, but based on the analysis of our data, a play-based approach is endorsed because it enables early childhood practitioners to respond to children's interests and so develop an approach that responds to the unique interests of every child (see Wood, 2007).

Child-centredness can be seen as either liberating or oppressive for early childhood practitioners (see MacNaughton, 1997). Liberal feminists regard child-centred practice as liberating the child and therefore democratic, although this can be viewed as a largely Western interpretation of the term (Tabulawa, 2003). However, child-centred practice can raise questions about the role of the practitioner in the learning environment (see Wood, 2007) and whether the practitioner is marginalised and oppressed by the focus on the child (Walkerdine, 1981). It could also be a reflection of the almost effortless practice of a good practitioner going unnoticed as their careful watchfulness (Georgeson et al., 2014, p. 98) informs their responses to the children that they work with.

As is evident in our data, careful interactions with children are also underpinned by sensitive relationships with families, and documents from the three countries all include some reference to the family. This is perhaps unsurprising when considered in relation to children's interests; the things of interest to children are likely to be those that they are familiar with and these will be shaped by the cultural context of the family. On closer examination, exactly how the child is considered in relation to the family differs between the three countries; Hungarian practitioners are placed much more explicitly *in loco parentis*, Italian practitioners must build on the good work already

done in the family and English practitioners must ally themselves with parents to support children towards achieving good learning outcomes.

Conclusion

International recognition of early years provision as the foundation for later lifelong learning has led to a focus on outcomes and assessment of children's development, responding political interest in 'what works', an investment concept to apply the right techniques at the right time in order to get the maximum outcomes (Moss, 2007). Although all three strands of child-centred practice identified by Chung and Walsh are still in evidence, the developmentalist perspective – encapsulated in developmental goals that may or may not have been achieved – has begun to dominate understandings of how best to support children in their learning. Whilst we have no wish to discourage interest in the developmental advantages of ECEC, we argue that foregrounding a developmentalist perspective of child-centredness to such an extent can compromise the child-centred aspects of an approach, particularly when, as in England, there are predetermined learning goals to be assessed in children at an early stage.

We return to Stephen's observation about the usefulness of 'child-centred', that '[w]hen a concept is so variously interpreted it is difficult to sustain the argument that it is pivotal to the success of children's learning' (Stephen, 2010, p. 18). Indeed, the association of child-centredness with progressive education has rendered it a 'pejorative term' to some politicians (Pilcher & Wagg, 1996, p. 4), limiting its use in policy documents. Use of the word 'child-centred' can, however, support 'a common ideological identity across early childhood educators, despite, at times, large between- and within-group differences' and 'can be drawn upon to form a temporary coalition of different subgroups' (Chung & Walsh, 2000, p. 216). We would like to suggest further that the usefulness of the term might lie as much in what it does *not* signify, than in exactly how it might be interpreted; it can position speakers in opposition to current official discourses on childhood (for example as encapsulated in EYFS) and so, regardless of its *meaning*, convey the individual's *sense* of a different kind of pedagogy that does not focus on outcomes, targets and policy agendas for the child and family, but on something else that the speaker regards as much more important – the child.

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