

“It’s not About You, It’s about them”: Philosophy, Evidence, and the Role of Language in Adopting Reggio Emilia for Young d/Deaf and Hard of Hearing Learners

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Abstract

The educational needs of deaf children have been intensely debated over the last hundred years; as this population has historically struggled, develop English literacy skills comparable to their same-aged peers who can hear (Paul, 2009). This study examined the factors influencing teachers’ decision to adopt the Reggio Emilia approach in classrooms for young deaf learners. Findings indicate that while the role of teacher belief, identity, and philosophy were central themes in this study, and consistent with the history of the field, the most important implication of this work is the role of teacher experience and documentation evidence as key influences in teacher decision making in their curricular choices. It also demonstrates broader conceptions of what evidence might mean in the real world context of the early childhood classroom. This study also highlighted the need for curricula to be able to address the diverse language needs of young deaf children. Finally, the school context was key in teachers’ positive experiences with the Reggio Emilia approach, as it encouraged the adoption of Reggio Emilia for all early childhood classrooms making resources accessible to teachers. Furthermore, the co-teaching process allowed for on-going professional support in making complex decisions regarding instructional choices within the curriculum model. The complex nature of engaging in curricular decision-making was showcased through teachers’ reflective processes using belief, experiences, and evidence of learning to guide their practice.

Introduction

Since the 1800’s theorists, policy makers, and educators alike have debated the goals, content, and pedagogy associated with curriculum in the United States, as curriculum is at the heart of the American education system (Schiro, 2013). Over time, these debates have ebbed and flowed, largely influenced by historical, ideological, and political factors (Kliebard, 2004). For the field of deaf education, curricular debates have been especially passionate, as d/Deaf and Hard of Hearing² (d/DHH) students have historically struggled develop English literacy skills comparable to their same-aged peers who can hear (Gallaudet Research Institute, 2013; Paul, 2009). Although passionate curricular debate has been a cornerstone of deaf education, only five formal curricula have been specifically researched with the deaf population in mind (Easterbrooks, 2010). Of these investigations, none focuses exclusively on curriculum in early childhood education and care. As such, it is important to understand the curricular and instructional choices that face early education teachers of d/DHH children (TODs) in a twenty-first century world.

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² Although people-first language has been accepted as the preferred terminology to place the value of people as individuals over the characteristics of their disabilities, it has “long been rejected” by those in the Deaf community (Mackelprang, 2011, p. 441). Instead, many use deaf-first language to respect the connection of identity and hearing loss that is important to the Deaf community. Therefore, the term “deaf person” will be used hereafter to refer to a person who is deaf or hard of hearing.

United States Curricular Context

In order to understand teachers' curricular choices, it is important to consider the broader context of the US. With a foundation in *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), contemporary curricular discourses have largely focused on the limitations of American schools and the need for reform to increase student learning. As such, curricular debates have been thrust once again into the public spotlight with an emphasis on the role of standardization of curriculum and accountability frameworks (Ravitch, 2013). There are those who would argue that the creation of early childhood standards can actually serve to unify the currently fragmented field of early childhood education and care that has resulted from uncoordinated public policies and multiple service models (Kagan, 2012). At the same time the centralization of curriculum may actually serve to reinforce the status quo in society, rather than change it. In particular, standardization efforts have been associated with prescribed curriculum being imposed on teachers from top-down reform systems affecting teacher satisfaction and retention, primarily as the result of "factory-like schools" that "unduly deprofessionalize, disempower, and demotivate teachers" (Ingersoll, 2003, p. 7). Despite the debate on the benefits of standardization, recent educational policy has consistently moved forward an agenda privileging accountability frameworks. For example, in early childhood education and care, accountability can be seen through the creation of early learning standards, Quality Rating Improvement Systems, and kindergarten readiness assessments (e.g. Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge). Initiatives such as these have been focal points of education policy and funding in recent years, providing more resources to educational settings employing accountability principles.

Curricular Context of Deaf Education

The curricular context of deaf education is situated within the broader US context, but also includes unique historical, social, and political contexts. Specifically, the controversy regarding the 'best' approach to the education of deaf children, to teach them to use a signed language or a spoken language, has defined choices on curriculum and instruction in deaf education for more than two centuries (Moores, 2010). This debate, also known as the "methods wars" (Moores, 2010, p.22), has repeatedly overshadowed evidence gathered on various curricula, resulting in belief-driven curricular choices rather than an evidence-driven decision-making (Easterbrooks, 2010). Furthermore, this debate has been approached with much emotion and fervor in the field, "operating just beneath the surface and frequently flare[ing] into open hostility" (Moores, 2001, pp. 67). Therefore, when investigating the nature of language and instruction in classrooms, the classroom context must be addressed with sensitivity to the loaded history that surrounds the dialogue about language use in deaf education.

Methods

This particular investigation was part of a larger study of instruction and practice of early childhood teachers of deaf children. The research design that was most appropriate for this study was qualitative collective case study with the classroom as the unit of analysis for inquiry (Stake, 2000). Multiple case study design was required, as this case was aimed the age of early childhood, which would require more than one age level and multiple teachers. Recruitment resulted in four teachers of deaf children (TOD) from two separate classrooms. Given the entwined nature of the co-teaching relationship, it was then most appropriate to bind the case at the classroom level.

School Context

The site of this research was a private school for deaf students in the United States that focused on the development of American Sign Language (ASL) and English through a bilingual-bicultural language philosophy. This philosophy privileges ASL as the main language of learning and contends it needs to be presented as a completely separate entity from spoken language and written English (Moores, 2010). Complete access to language for all people in the school was a strong cultural ideal within the school context. The early childhood program in this school prided itself on meeting children's individual needs in all areas of development. As such, there was not one officially curriculum adopted for the program. Instead, teachers were afforded the autonomy to make curricular decisions based on their children's Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). While the program did not provide mandates on the curriculum used, it did provide some resources for teachers that were willing to attend training on a curricular philosophy called Reggio Emilia.

Reggio Emilia: The Reggio Emilia approach is a curricular philosophy that originated in the town of Reggio Emilia in Italy after World War II (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998). Reggio Emilia is centered on children and their capabilities. In this view children are seen as, “*rich, strong, and powerful*” (Martalock, 2012, p. 7). Widely recognized as being rooted in social constructivism, children are co-constructors of knowledge developing shared understandings with teachers and other students through their day (Martalock, 2012).

In addition, Reggio Emilia uses guiding principles designed to, “create a culture of learning and teaching” rather than a scripted curriculum (Martalock, 2012, p. 7). As such, this approach is “highly contextualized to the needs and values of the community a particular school serves” (Bond, 2015, p. 463). Therefore, the curriculum is ever evolving and “intentionally emerges day to day as teachers review what children are learning” (Griebing, 2011, p. 6).

Participants

One preschool class and one kindergarten class, each with two co-teachers, participated in this research. The preschool teachers included Alice and Lauren, who taught for 19 years and five years respectively. Both teachers had typical hearing. The kindergarten teachers included, Kelsey and Maria. Kelsey has taught for two years and Maria taught for 6 ½ years. Kelsey is a Deaf native ASL user and Maria is hearing. Both classrooms have a 1:2 adult-student ratio in their classes.

The preschool classroom was able to engage in the curricular philosophy at a deeper level than the kindergarten classroom, as they had been using this model for a longer amount of time and attending more professional development on the topic. For example, the kindergarten classroom was able to engage in child directed instruction to promote language development, but had yet to fully employ the discovery based learning centers in their classroom environment.

Data Collection

Data was collected during the 2012-2013 school year. Data included in this investigation included a demographic questionnaire, a one-hour semi-structured teacher interview, approximately 6 hours of observation per classroom, and one-hour stimulated recall session with each set of co-teachers. Stimulated recall is an “introspection procedure in which (normally) videotaped passages of behavior are replayed to individuals to stimulate recall of their concurrent cognitive activity” (Lyle, 2003, p. 861). Stimulated recall has been employed in educational research to help understand the complex behavior and decision-making process of teachers (Lyle, 2003). Although various research has engaged in stimulated recall procedures differently, the general sequence of events has included videoing a teacher involved in instruction and then requiring the teacher recall her/his thoughts through a ‘think aloud’ procedure. In order to account for the co-construction of knowledge within the act of co-teaching, when both teachers were active in the video, the stimulated recall sessions were conducted with both teachers simultaneously (see [author name removed], 2015).

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed through the approach of qualitative content analysis, a “research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). Content analysis can take a variety of forms in quantitative and qualitative research; however, for the purposes of this study conventional content analysis (qualitative) was selected. Conventional content analysis uses an inductive process to generate themes and patterns within data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Analysis began with review of the data to make notes on the content being represented and generate some initial codes. All coding was completed through the use of video coding software called ELAN and transcription when appropriate. Through the second examination, codes were solidified and connected to the conceptual framework. One theme, related to adopting a child directed curricular model, infused the study and served as a foundation for teachers’ practice as a professional. The larger study addressed this theme in addition to the specific language related instructional strategies employed by the teachers.

Upon further examination of the data, there was much more to discover about the teachers’ journeys as professionals as they engaged in curricular choices rather than just what those choices were. Therefore, this investigation will address the following question: What were the factors influencing early childhood teachers’ decision making processes as they adopted and implemented the Reggio Emilia approach in their classrooms?

In this expanded analysis, conventional content analysis was also used to generate the codes for the factors influencing teachers' choice to adopt Reggio Emilia. These codes included: experience of failure, experience of success, evidence of success, valuing students, valuing language, professional support, and addressing diversity. Finally, these codes were condensed into five underlying themes: a) connections to teachers' preexisting beliefs about children and their language; b) the ability for child directed instruction to reach diverse learners; c) lack of success with prescribed curricula; d) observed child learning; e) opportunity for on-going professional support.

Limitations and Trustworthiness

This sub-study examines one narrow research question in regard to the factors impacting teacher decision-making for four teachers. While this allows in depth analysis of complex thoughts and behaviors, it is a small scope not necessary generalizable to the larger field. To address issues of trustworthiness, the following criteria of soundness were used: data triangulation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), search for disconfirming evidence and counter-interpretations (AERA, 2006), and transparency of the analysis process (AERA, 2006). The researcher also took into account the saliency and emphasis of a teacher's statement in addition to the instances of a code occurring, as not all statements are created equal.

Findings

The foundation of classroom instruction for both the preschool and kindergarten classrooms was the importance of child directed instruction through the use of the Reggio Emilia model. Teachers conveyed their thoughts and beliefs regarding their adoption of this approach through their interviews and stimulated recall sessions; however, examples of Reggio Emilia could also be seen in the observations. As previously mentioned, five themes related to teachers' adoption of this program were found: a) connections to teachers' preexisting beliefs about children and their language; b) the ability for child directed instruction to reach diverse learners; c) lack of success with prescribed curricula; d) observed child learning; e) opportunity for on-going professional support.

Connections to Teachers' Preexisting Beliefs about Children and Their Language

Reggio Emilia is not an actual curriculum; rather it is a set of guiding principles to create a rich learning environment in the classroom (Forman & Fyfe, 1998). This program was initially appealing because it resonated with the preexisting beliefs of the teachers. Beliefs are psychological understandings that influence people's interpretations about the world (Philipp, 2007). The teachers in this study spent considerable time discussing how their own beliefs played an important role in their affinity to this approach.

At the core of the Reggio Emilia philosophy is the belief that children are valuable and competent. Lauren indicated that she experienced an emotional connection to this specific aspect of the model, "once I started learning about it and learning valuing the child as the learner, as opposed to me as the teacher, it really impacted me. And then I slowly made the change to where I am today." Alice confirmed this sentiment, as she believes the Reggio approach echoed her previously established beliefs about children and valuing their competencies,

One of the components of the philosophy is that children are competent. And I truly believe that kids are competent. I believe that they're capable learners and they're competent in thinking for themselves and developing skills for themselves – if we set up an environment that is rich for them to access. So I already believe that, I already know that and that just feels really good to be able to implement it in a classroom without having to force predesigned curriculums on them. The philosophy of Reggio Emilia not only aligned with teacher beliefs about the children, but also aligned with the overarching language philosophy of the school. Part of valuing children in the Reggio Emilia model, is also valuing their language. The bilingual-bicultural language philosophy also argues for full access of children to ASL at all times on campus, ensuring they are always part of the conversation as valuable members of the community (Moore, 2010). These teachers indicated that the bilingual-bicultural language philosophy was important to them as professionals. They also demonstrated their adherence to the philosophy during observations. For example, even when the hearing teachers had private meetings, they conducted them in ASL in case someone entered the room unexpectedly.

The teachers' beliefs about valuing language also extended to the children. Specifically, the teachers were excited to see the children valuing their own language within the classroom. Lauren exemplified this sentiment, Communication is valued and students' communication is valued and it is strongly encouraged that students try to communicate with each other to work out problems, share ideas. They're really adorable right now. They're valuing their own communication and their own language and their new thing is 'I have an idea!' and really whatever a student has to say is valued just as important if it is a right or a wrong answer.

As a result of the Reggio Emilia philosophy aligning with the preexisting beliefs of the teachers, they felt connected to the approach at the onset of their exposure to the curricular model. Furthermore, they took pride when the children also showed similar values about their competencies and language.

The Ability for Child Directed Instruction to Reach Diverse Learners

Lauren indicated that child directed instruction is, "all about the students and following their lead. And really looking at them, as, this [the child] is reason that we're here." All teachers noted that one of the primary reasons for needing a child directed approach was the diversity in language skills among the children they serve. As children come to the classroom with varying levels of ability, the teachers reported a need to meet the children where they are, rather than apply a one-size-fits-all approach. Kelsey articulated this best during her interview,

You really need to be child centered. Engage their interests. Discuss with them what they are thinking. Follow their thoughts. Really, jump into deep conversation with them ... because the children are so diverse. Some arrive at school with language; some arrive with no language - very little language. They only have gesture at home or really basic signs. Not much, support for ASL. So really, follow kids – student centered – to get as much language out of them as possible. Lauren also reported that as a result of the Reggio Emilia approach her instruction also changed substantially,

You're always gonna get a lot more from them if they are interested in what they are doing, than if you set your own agenda in mind. As a new teacher my first year, I've kind of come full circle, but I think have a ways to go. But it's not about you, it's about them [the children]. Furthermore, during an observation, the preschool teachers had been using the projector to show a slideshow related to a project on which the students were working. At the conclusion of the slideshow, the children left the area to participate in center-based activities. However, as the children moved through the centers, one student noticed that the screen saver was being projected on the screen. The screen saver consisted of simple lines in different colors floating across the screen. One student looked at the teacher and signed, "dance?" When the teacher nodded in approval, she started to imitate the screen saver in her own movements. Not before long, the entire class had gravitated to the screen, dancing and laughing. The teachers followed the children in their shift of activity, modeling description of the lines and body movements in ASL. In the stimulated recall session, Lauren noted that the simple screen saver "inspired" the children to dance, therefore the teachers made an effort to take advantage of their interest as a way to provide more advanced ASL concepts.

By capitalizing on this interest, the teachers were able to see children of various ability levels participate and learn from each other. During stimulated recall the teachers noted one student who walked around the room recruiting the other children to come dance with him, This little guy whose head dancing [break dancing on his head] right here, doesn't socialize all day, but this non-language based activity was something that he felt comfortable and could participate in ... he's interacting with the kids, he's having fun with them ... he wants everyone to be involved.

Similar activities could be seen in the kindergarten classroom, as Kelsey was engaging with children during their morning free play and a student abruptly interjected a comment about the fire alarm. Following his lead, Kelsey took a step back and began to model for the students in ASL the fire alarm process, from the fire starting, to the smoke detector, to the sprinklers, and, finally, the alarm. She indicated later during stimulated recall that by following the child's interests she was able to "pull more language" out of the student through this exchange. Therefore, these teachers felt that this curricular philosophy would be most beneficial to meet the needs of the language diversity in the classroom, as they are able to meet the children where they are and provide more motivation to engage in language exchanges.

Lack of Success with Prescribed Curricula

In addition to belief and philosophy, experience was also important in teachers' perceptions on the Reggio Emilia approach. For example, the preschool teachers indicated that they did not start off their teaching careers with a child directed focus, but changed their teaching in light of their experiences. Lauren recalled her early years, "I did not start out teaching that way [child directed], at all It was 'I will teach you how to do your colors. I'll teach you how to do this. I'll teach you how to do this.'" However, these teachers felt a lack of success teaching in a teacher directed manner. They discussed their trying, and failing, at keeping children engaged in activities long enough to learn. Alice also shared her journey toward her deviating from traditional teacher-led curriculum,

Then I started with a science curriculum, which is supposedly *big book* and *kid friendly* and *multisensory* and all of that. My kids hated it! I spent 10 minutes on it and they're flipping tables and flipping chairs Kids were very frustrated and interfering with the learning that was going on One day, and it was early on, and I just said, 'This curriculum just isn't working for me.'

The lack of success early in their careers was specifically salient in the teachers' comments. This is unsurprising, as the experience of failure is something that has been associated with high levels of stress and lack of teacher retention in the classroom (Kauffman, Moore Johnson, Kardos, Liu, & Peske, 2002), which may lead to heightened memories of these situations. For the teachers in this study, the experience of failure was specifically associated with attempting to implement prescribed teacher-led curricula with their students. The teachers found that prescribed curriculum increased the challenging behaviors of children and reduced the children's engagement in the learning process, especially for those with the most limited levels of language.

As a result of the lack of success with these types of curriculum, the teachers reported feeling disconnected to their teaching in the classroom, "it just didn't match who I was, and it didn't seem to be matching who they [the children] were." Lasky (2005) defines teacher professional identity as, "how teachers define themselves to themselves and to others" (p. 901). The philosophy of Reggio Emilia was more compatible with how they viewed themselves as educators, which made them feel connected with the approach. Therefore, additional appeals of this approach were that it reduced experiences of failure and better matched teachers' conceptions of their own identity as a professional in the field.

Observed Child Learning

Teachers not only discussed their experience with failure, but also discussed their success with the Reggio Emilia approach. After some experience with the program, teachers noticed a level of learning occurring that reinforced their decision to use this approach in their classroom, [the children] found a book about wolves and they started playing and becoming wolves and I just let it go and we went with that And they just began to play, but learn through play They were able to develop thinking skills. They were able to move from one play scenario to another play scenario, without it being directed by me. Then a lot of scaffolding was able to occur, and from every member of the class, not just 'here are the higher-level kids' and 'here are the lower-level kids'. And so then I just fell in love. Then I'm like, 'I need to get better at it. I need to get more learning about it.'

Over time, their means for measuring success extended beyond experience and anecdotes, instead relying on evidence gathered through their use of documentation. Documentation is a key aspect of the Reggio Emilia approach for progress monitoring and evaluating individual student's instructional needs (Wien, Guyevskey, & Berdoussis, 2011). It requires teachers to record events and data about student learning on a regular basis. In these classrooms, documentation primarily consisted of notes, pictures, and videos. The preschool classroom took this one step further by posting reflections at centers and on the walls of the classroom, outlining how a particular activity evolved over time or impacted a child in the class. By examining the documentation of students and reflecting on a regular basis, Lauren reports that they can know when it is time to "bump it up" to the next level of difficulty, to meet the growing needs of the student in a child directed approach.

Lauren noted that not everyone in the field of education supports the idea of documentation as the primary means of assessment because they feel it lacks the rigor of more formal assessment. She disagrees with that opinion, however, as she believes that standardized assessment is actually limiting to the children, "I think a lot of critical thinking skills are getting lost in tests and standards." Furthermore, she contends that it is possible to maintain rigor in tracking student progress by connecting learning goals to documentation sources,

Some people think that the Reggio approach is kind of ridiculous, but I've gone to the frameworks of preschool [early childhood standards] and I've written a lot of documentation where I pull from the frameworks and show how the kids are meeting the frameworks from what we are doing [through documentation]. By using documentation to assess learning, these teachers reported seeing growth of students' language abilities, which reinforced their desire to continue with the Reggio program.

Lauren also reported that documentation also plays an important role in measuring her own effectiveness as a teacher. By being able to review documentation on her students' progress, she can see the impact her teaching has had, "it's my accountability for what they are doing." Therefore, Lauren felt documentation allowed for reflection on teaching practice and accountability to meet instructional goals for her students.

Opportunity for On-Going Professional Support

Through the support of the school, the teachers in this study were encouraged to attend workshops and professional development sessions introducing them to Reggio Emilia. These workshops were never imposed on teachers; however, they presented as professional learning opportunities for teachers to develop advanced teaching competencies. The teachers in this study took advantage of these opportunities and decided to try aspects of the program in their classroom. However, engaging in a complex curricular model is not an easy feat, as without a pre-scripted daily plan for language learning, the teachers needed to establish learning goals, create lessons, and meet the daily needs of students through their own repertoire of established knowledge.

The professional support for teaching in a child directed manner was considered especially essential, as child directed instruction is a complex process requiring active decision-making regarding how much or how little guidance is needed for a project. When recalling and reflecting on a drama activity, where the children created a story to act out as a play, the preschool teachers engaged in an exchange that exemplified this dilemma.

Alice: I think that's what's challenging in this class, I think, letting them lead but then where do we take over as the teacher to guide them to the next thing? And that could become a challenge, because this play thing is theirs and they own it, but if we just left it - they need guidance

Lauren: It might not come to an actual play too

Alice: Right, which is something that they really want

Lauren: And it might not include all of them

Furthermore, Maria also found a tension in following student interest and meeting instructional goals. Particularly, she struggled with addressing the early learning standards through a child directed framework, "There has to be a balance. Follow the child's interests and follow the standards, there has to be a balance...how do we directly teach [the standards] and support natural acquisition of language and learning? You know."

This was a complex issue that resulted in relying on the professional community to navigate. Collaboration is a method frequently employed by special educators, however, there is little evidence on the effect of co-teaching on student achievement (Friend, Cook, Harley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010). The teachers in this study believed that by having two teachers who work together to engage in planning or instruction enhanced student learning. Lauren reported the profound effect having a co-teacher has had on her teaching and the students' learning, I think that I probably wouldn't be where I am as a teacher without having someone that I can kind of go back and forth with. And I don't think they [the children] would be where they are without the two of us being able to go back and forth with each other.

Kelsey also discussed the co-teaching relationship in her interview, "We sit down and discuss things a lot. We work well together ... Communication [with each other] is a necessity [for effective teaching]." Furthermore, the co-teaching model provided a platform for reflection and flexibility in their instruction, It's constant thinking. It's constant analyzing me, analyzing my students - discussing with Alice You just kind of have to keep looking at the kids then looking at yourself and looking at the kids, and keep analyzing it because you always have to make changes as a teacher.

Specifically, the preschool teachers reported having daily discussions about the nature of the classroom instruction, often on the way to work. Even during the stimulated recall session, Lauren and Alice made a decision to change an aspect of a play they have been working on to better suit one of the student's needs.

The teachers noted that they think one of the students might be feeling a little left out given that her role in the play was much different than the other students. Alice noted, "My point was to make it special for her because she misses a lot. But sometimes being more special instead of being included ... (shrugs)" By the end of the stimulated recall session, these teachers had decided to change the nature of her role in the next draft of the play to be more integrated with the other students. Therefore, by engaging in collaboration with one another, these teachers viewed themselves as being able to provide rich instruction, grow as teachers, and adapt to the changing needs of their children.

Discussion

The teachers reported that one of the central reasons for adopting Reggio Emilia was that the curricular philosophy aligned well with their own philosophy and values about children and their education. From their first experience learning about the program, they felt connected to it and wanted to learn more. This is consistent with previous studies on teaching, as teacher belief has been shown to be an important influence on teaching practice, guiding teacher decision making on curriculum and instruction in the classroom (e.g. Buehl & Fives, 2009; Clark & Peterson, 1986).

This finding is especially important, as belief-driven approaches have traditionally overshadowed evidence-driven approaches in deaf education for the past 200 years, despite efforts in recent years to shift focus to evidenced-based instruction (Easterbrooks, 2010). Furthermore, the role of language philosophy continued to play a role in the teachers' decision-making, as the teachers' belief in the language philosophy of the school was connected to their beliefs regarding the applicability of Reggio Emilia's philosophy to meet the needs of their children. As a result, some findings of this study are consistent with the historical contexts, philosophy, and research of the field. While the role of teacher belief and philosophy were central themes in this study, teacher experience and evidence were also key influences in teacher decision making in their curricular choices. Teachers' experiences with curricula, both positive and negative, heavily influenced their decision-making process regarding curricula in their classrooms. Specifically, these teachers generated knowledge and opinions about curricula through their practice, or what is known as *knowledge-in-practice* (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). As a result, the choice to continue with a curriculum was dependent on their perceived feelings of success or failure with it.

The teachers in this study spent a considerable amount of time discussing the ability of Reggio Emilia to successfully meet the needs of diverse skill levels in their classrooms, as deaf children are a heterogeneous group with widely varying skills and abilities (Marschark, 2007). The teachers in this study measured the success-failure continuum in three ways: observations of behavior, observations of learning, and documentation. First, observing children's lack of engagement and behavioral outbursts were associated with the failure of a curriculum to meet the needs of the children. Second, teachers spoke proudly of observations of children expressing themselves through language and valuing all language. Finally, teachers confirmed their observations through engaging in documentation of learning, a key component of the Reggio Emilia approach (Wien, Guyevsky, & Berdoussis, 2011). Therefore, teacher experiences and observations may have initially drawn teachers into Reggio Emilia; however, the confirmation of children's learning through evidence reinforced their decision to use the approach.

It is important to note that while the role of evidence in making curricular decisions was apparent, the types of evidence cited were classroom and experience based. The teachers in this study did not cite any curricular research, or even any language and literacy curricula that have actually been researched in regard to deaf children (*Reading Milestones, Reading Bridge, Edmark Reading Program, Fairview Reading Program, or Reading Recovery*). Therefore, it seemed that the teachers' *knowledge-for-practice*, or knowledge and perspectives generated through research mechanisms, played a minimal role in their decision-making on which curriculum to adopt (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Instead, by focusing on *knowledge-in-practice*, teachers engaged in local data based decision-making in their work.

Finally, this study occurred within the specific context of a school that allowed for teachers to engage in curricular decision-making. The teachers in this study were regarded as professionals who had the skills to decide on how to meet the needs of the children in their classrooms. As such, they had more responsibility and power over the curriculum in their classrooms. In addition, the teachers were offered support and encouragement from the school administration to learn about the Reggio Emilia approach, which opened up a supportive space for them to engage in this curricular model.

This support is in contrast to their initial experiences of being handed a stack of prescribe curricula and left to teach them on their own. Therefore, the school made it possible for teachers to problem-solve complex curricular issues that could have potentially derailed their feelings of success with this approach.

Future Research

The first implication for research would be to examine whether the same curricular autonomy, support, and resources would produce the same conclusions for other curriculum in early childhood. Second, researching the extent to which teachers in this study continue to use Reggio Emilia over time would contribute to understandings of sustainability for the model. Finally, examining the student learning in these classrooms along side of the teaching strategies of Reggio Emilia would also be valuable.

Conclusion

This study examined the factors influencing teachers' decision to adopt the Reggio Emilia approach in classrooms for young deaf learners. The factors cited, not only included those historically associated with the field about teacher belief and philosophy, but also included evidence generated through practice and documentation, which is a finding that diverges from strict belief-driven approaches to adopting curriculum. It also demonstrates broader conceptions of what evidence might mean in the real world context of the early childhood classroom. Finally, the school context was key in teachers' positive experiences with the Reggio Emilia approach, as it encouraged the adoption of Reggio Emilia for all early childhood classrooms making resources accessible to teachers. Furthermore, the co-teaching process allowed for on-going professional support in making complex decisions regarding instructional choices within the curriculum model. In conclusion, the complex nature of engaging in curricular decision-making was showcased through teachers' reflective processes using belief, experiences, and evidence of learning to guide their practice and to maintain the focus on the children at hand, because as Lauren stated, "it's not about you, it's about them."

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