



Practitioner Researcher

An analysis of an art project through Reggio Emilia and Deleuzean theory

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The study of art has become an important aspect of early childhood education. According to Picasso, “every child is an artist”. However, how do we, as teachers, protect and cultivate children’s art making? Many theories guiding arts education have arisen from developmental psychology, however, in this paper, projects are analysed in relation to Reggio Emilia practice and Deleuzean philosophy. In the last part of the paper, I will reflect on my own arts learning experience and consider new possibilities, referring to Deleuze.

Move, Act, Play, Sing (MAPS)

The Move, Act, Play, Sing (MAPS) project was a two year performing arts project that explored arts education with young children. Three Reggio Emilia inspired centres participated in the project and received support from community artists in dance, drama and music. This project focused on children generating their own ideas with centre staff, parents and community artists, with inspiration from Reggio Emilia philosophy (MAPS, 2010). This paper derives from two video clips of the dancer working in two different centres and an interview undertaken at the culmination of MAPS.

Observing Adrian, a dancer, working with a group of children in the first clip, we see the children dancing freely. There is no intervention from teachers throughout the free play as Adrian engages with the children and their movements and rhythm. During the dance, children start to imitate each other, exchanging and generating new movement. One boy recalled his dance back to what he first saw on TV. The other boys who knew the moves danced with the boy as they sang to the lyrics of the music. Gradually, children brought different elements into the dance. For example, some children dressed up and used some props, one boy took photos of the dancing children, and one just stood and watched. It was amazing to see how the children responded to the music and space in different ways.

In the second clip, Adrian began with everyone in a circle. He set up the activity with a move of his hand and a sound. Every child had a turn in moving and making a sound, and they were enthusiastic about continuing on with the activity. Children made various actions, like clapping, shaking hands, touching body parts and animal pretend sounds. Later on, the activity developed into full body actions with themes. At the end, children developed their own story lines to connect different actions together.



In a follow-up interview, Adrian discussed his conception of dance as being basically any movement that has an expression or intensity. Being respectful to the learners, he adjusted his teaching to be open, inclusive and dynamic. The contact position technique he used allowed children to perform movement with individual body parts and group interactions, instead of being shown the movements. Adrian sought to engage and learn from the children interactively and responsively to make learning happen. Overall, the dance experience became an invitation to learn with children.

The Magic Flute Project

The magic flute project was an Australian music program that investigated the children's response to Mozart's magic flute opera. The project was guided by the Reggio Emilia approach to provide rich and meaningful provocations for the children. Through watching Mozart's magic flute opera and working with an opera singer, the children developed a series of learning activities that included singing, story-telling, drawing, and social exchange of ideas. The research has been designed as an ethnographic case study approach, to analyse the learning that occurred through the research.

Special arts projects require long-term commitment from the artists and researchers to make the project possible. For this project, the opera singer was crucial to creating the learning environment in a way that acted as a catalyst for the teachers. Again, in this project, the learning was governed by children's own intensities. Children took the idea of opera singing and developed it to other art forms, like drawing and dramatic play. It all happened according to different contexts and the collaboration among participants.

Comparing these two projects, they shared some common principles. The basis for both projects was the Reggio Emilia approach. In Reggio practice, pedagogical support is child centred (Wurm, 2005). Rinaldi believes that a child is "rich, strong, and powerful... unique subject with rights rather than simple needs" (as cited in Jaruszewicz, 1994, p. 6). With this concept, children are seen as competent individuals that can construct their learning at their own pace. Teachers, researchers and artists in both projects showed respect for children's ideas and followed the children's lead.

In the 'Magic Flute' project, children are seen as competent communicators when involved in dialogic community (Nyland, Acker, Fettis, & Deans, 2011). Jaruszewicz (1994) points out that Reggio Emilia philosophy sustains community work among the teachers, parents, children and the community. There is a collaboration among all the parties that makes it possible for children to develop holistically. For example, in the 'Magic Flute' project, Ruby's learning was inspired by the opera singer. Her singing interest was furthered through the exploration of the opera in the centre environment. Later on, with other teacher's support, Ruby expanded her learning into drawing. This learning did not happen in isolation; it was the outcome of collaboration between the artist, teachers, children and the parents. The same thing happened in MAPS when Adrian, the community artist, also mentioned the support he gained from working with the teachers to carry on the project (A. Smith, interview, October, 2013).



Deleuzo-Guattarian concepts, as a grounding theory in analysing children's work, provide a more in depth understanding into art education. From an overview of children's learning in both projects, there is pattern that shows seemingly random changes in learning directions. This kind of learning is described as a rhizomatic (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). The pattern of rhizome represents intricate and complex relationships among things. Parr (2010) describes the connections among objects, places and people, which involve both similarity and differences. In the MAPS project, there was a development from a single sign to whole body movements and then later into new games. In the 'Magic Flute' study, the opera inspired children in different ways. Ruby, for example, was extremely interested the singing part and practiced to perform the most challenging singing. Some children were amazed by the appearance of the characters and then put this into their drawing. Others developed their dramatic play based on the opera's story line, creating a flow between each connected point and leading to endless reworking.

These flows and connections draw forth children's play as a line of flight (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Lines of flight in Deleuzian philosophy point to children's play not occurring in linear or straight lines. Instead, children follow a line of flight with their own imagination and their bodies. The physical surroundings also created milieus that allowed children to make connections, generating ideas and storylines as their play flowed freely in between other milieus (Garoiian, 2012). Similarly, in the MAPS free dance video, one boy changed his ideas and joined the others' dance, then went to the dress up corner, picked up a handbag and re-joined the dance. Finally, he took photos and went outside. This series of non-linear play shows the characters morphing in a virtual and actual sense, according to the boy's own intensities. There is nothing linear among his actions; they were scrambled, repeated and flowed between different milieus.

Within these lines of flight, children experience deterritorialisation and re-deterritorialisation through dynamic changing milieus (Sellers, 2010). Sellers explains deterritorialisation and re-territorialisation as an unavoidable process where children continuously negotiate, ebb and flow with change and alteration. In simple words, deterritorialisation means forming a new territory. This new territory includes both interiority and exteriority (ibid). Referring to the boy dancer as an example, his role swapped from dancer to shopper, photographer and then shopper again. As his role segued, his territory changed accordingly, from dance floor to dress up corner to dance floor and to outside area. Sometimes, the process is more complex when change is an interiority. From the example, we see that children can repeat the deterritorialisation and re-deterritorialisation process through their storylines. Children negotiate their interiority with the exteriority of their play.

There are lots of things included in the physical surroundings, like resources, environment setting, and teachers. All those surroundings form a stage for children to engage their ideas, feelings and willingness. As Adrian mentioned in the interview, the important thing is to keep things simple, open and inclusive (A. Smith, interview, October, 2013). Within the environment, children are more willing to join the activities and their deterritorialisation if an idea follows the line of flight. This happens when the milieus provide children with the freedom, space and power to go with their imagination. Secondly, teaching plays an important role in forming the milieus. The centre practice will create the



environment that empowers children to construct their own value through a child's own making (Sassalos, 1999). As suggested by Lucy Wood (online discussion, September 13, 2013), a meaningful democratic curriculum interprets how to empower children through their own exploration. Both of the projects in this paper showed the respect for children's rights and a willingness for emergent learning to occur.

Conclusion

The analysis of these projects through Reggio Emilia and Deleuzean theory has been an inspiration. The reflection on these theories has helped me to review my art education. Arts education is always supplanted by other subjects, like mathematics, English language, history, physics or chemistry. In China, the arts subjects are not even available in secondary and high school. If students are really keen on arts, they need to find private tutors and take more advanced courses at an Arts University. Due to the lack of arts education, most of my arts experiences are influenced by rules or norms. Basically everything I know is imitated from teachers and the teachers always graded arts work according to their standards. After that, it seems very hard to develop my own innate aesthetic ability, as the norms and rules have deeply shaped my views. During drawing class, the theme of the class is set by teachers. All the students need to follow the teachers' instructions, imitate the teachers' movements, and try to make a perfect copy. Failing to do so would result in punishment, such as repeating drawing until the perfect copy is produced. The whole learning experience was contorted, boring and frustrating. With this kind of learning experience, it kills children's imagination, creativity and learning agency (Rizvi, 1994). Educators should not use tradition to shape students' imagination.

Based on the Reggio Emilia and Deleuzean theories, I would redesign the whole learning process. Enlightened by Reggio Emilia learning, the environment would be set as stress free, rich in trust and stimulating for the children. The teaching style will be students leading and teachers only acting as facilitators. When planning the learning, a Deleuzean way of thinking would help the children at the centre, rather than a pre-set plan. From the reflective discussion on children's art learning, we could make the assumption that children may not know what art is, but they are naturally engaging in making through interrelationships, following the lines of flight, making rhizomatic connections, and deterritorialising and redeterritorialising their own becomings within the flow of milieus. Art education can be such an interesting, meaningful and challenging arena for early childhood education. As educators, we should not put limitations on children. We should provide open, trusting, stimulating spaces to nourish children's ideas, creativity and agency.

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