



Peer-reviewed Paper

Reggio Emilia Pedagogy in Early Childhood Education: How can this approach enhance visual arts experiences in New Zealand?

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The increased scrutiny of visual arts education in early childhood settings in Aotearoa New Zealand is attributed to inspiration for teaching and learning drawn from the pedagogy of the early childhood centres in Reggio Emilia, Italy. This paper argues that engaging with the pedagogy of Reggio Emilia can enhance approaches in this New Zealand by provoking teachers to examine existing practices in the context of visual arts education. It is proposed that this requires teachers to resist a replication of Reggio Emilia pedagogy and to re-conceptualise visual arts education as a means for children to represent their encounters with each other both within the local and wider context of New Zealand.

Introduction

There is a substantial body of literature about Reggio Emilia by authors, both internationally (Edwards, Gandini & Forman 1998; Gandini, Hill, Cadwell, & Schwall, 2005; Pelo, 2007; Rinaldi, 2006) and locally (Bayes, 2006; Pairman & Terreni, 2001; Pohio, 2006; Richards, 2009; Terreni, 2005) which has gained the attention of early childhood educators in New Zealand. For many teachers in New Zealand an especially compelling dimension of the Reggio Emilia early childhood centres, is the way in which the environment is presented alongside how children interpret and represent their experiences. Gandini (1998), remarking on a children's artwork has said: "everything [in the environment] is thoughtfully chosen and placed with the intention to create communication" (p. 163). Such 'visual representations' are part of what Edwards, Gandini and Forman (1998) refer to as the extensive ways children communicate their perspectives of the world. New Zealanders are attracted by the notion of an 'atelier' (visual art studio) and an 'atelierista' (visual art teacher) which provide tangible ways for these explorations to be strengthened, however, the significance of the atelier (and the atelierista) goes far beyond the physical spaces they inhabit. The atelier is a space for research for children and teachers, and for listening as children explore the possibilities presented by different materials with which to communicate their thoughts and feelings (Gandini, 2005).

Engaging with the pedagogy of Reggio Emilia has begun to motivate a number of teachers in New Zealand to, first of all, rethink and reconstruct the manner in which they present their teaching and overall learning environments (Bayes, 2006). More specifically, it has prompted them to re-examine how the visual arts are intertwined within the environment (Pohio, 2006) as a way for children to interact. However, rather than replicating these contexts, or "doing Reggio" as Carter (2009, p. 27) argues, it is more crucial for teachers to view these encounters with the pedagogy of Reggio Emilia as a means of untangling their own values and beliefs about teaching and learning. More importantly, the aim is to avoid the "assimilation of superficial trappings" (Ardzejewska & Coutts 2004, p. 22). It is hoped that by developing an increased awareness of the theoretical perspectives that inform Reggio Emilia, that teachers can examine their practice and become



ready to “change what they consider tried and true strategies” (Knight, 2008, p. 313).

Embracing the Knots

To understand the broader context in which the pedagogy of Reggio Emilia developed, it is important to know about the city in which the Reggio Emilia early childhood settings are located (Dahlberg & Moss, 2006). An increased understanding of the Reggio Emilia social, cultural and political context enables New Zealand teachers to reflect upon their own cultural setting. In this way they can begin to draw the threads, or, as Mardell (2001, p. 280) suggests, embrace the “cultural knots” that these encounters may generate. Robertson (2006) goes further, suggesting an approach which resonates with the metaphor of *whāriki* (weaving) that underpins *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996), the early childhood education curriculum. Robertson (2006) proposes that:

The ‘cultural knots’ which become apparent when observing another culture’s interpretation of education can serve as a doorway into reconceptualising our own ideas of education. These knots are the untidy complexities that emerge when differing cultural contexts intermingle. Can we make the gaze upon Reggio Emilia’s educational experiences a cultural knot rather than a replica? (p. 152).

I suggest that visual art experiences in early childhood settings in New Zealand could be enhanced by exploring *Te Whāriki* and its metaphor of ‘weaving’ as a uniquely New Zealand way of embracing Reggio Emilia pedagogy.

What makes Reggio Emilia Unique?

The emergence of the early childhood centres in the city of Reggio Emilia in the Northern region of Emilia Romagna arose from the destruction and hardship resulting from the aftermath of the Second World War. Part of the appeal of Emilia Reggio is the way in which Reggio challenges the concept of the restrictive and narrow curriculum. As Dahlberg and Moss (2006) write: “Reggio is ... a provocation to an increasing dominant and smothering discourse about early childhood education in particular and education in general” (p. 17). There are several key principles that reflect the essence of the early childhood contexts in Reggio Emilia (Dahlberg & Moss, 2006). These include: respectful and authentic communication; the importance of the environment: small group collaborative learning; the pedagogy of listening; the presence of the atelier and an atelierista, widening the idea of language into a ‘hundred languages’, and in particular representing thinking visually.

The atelier resonates with early childhood centres which are being designed or modified to encapsulate Reggio Emilia pedagogy. The atelier is synonymous with Reggio Emilia in allowing a place where children can explore or as Gandini (2005) describes it, “for digging with one’s own hands and one’s own mind, and for refining one’s own eyes, through the practice of the visual arts” (p.7). The evolution of the atelier has served as a political statement in response to what has been seen as the marginalisation of expressive education (Gandini, 2005). It has also been considered a reaction to the dominant discourse of education based on written and oral forms of communication to the detriment of visual experiences. An important



feature of the atelier is its role in providing a place where research takes place and where new discoveries can be made with materials, tools and techniques. Gandini, Hill, Caldwell and Schwall (2005) claim, that the atelier provides a space for “wondering with children about what they see, think, and feel and how they make sense of their experiences” (p. 2). In the Reggio Emilia contexts, children are accustomed to using their own field drawings or working drawings as a basis for discussion, argument, and for further work, such as making group murals, sculptures and paintings. These practices are so interwoven within the teaching and learning context that they have become part of the fabric of the everyday experiences of children.

Dialogue with places

There are many documented examples of visual arts experiences, underpinned by Reggio Emilia pedagogy that provide evidence for early childhood teachers of the value of this approach. For example at the Loris Malaguzzi International Centre a project was designed to gain a deeper understanding of how children interact and respond to different spatial dimensions of the International Centre, in collaboration with atelieristas and teachers (Reggio Children, 2008). The spark for the project stemmed from a city wide art-initiative where chosen works carried out by five artists were commissioned for various parts of the city. Such art installations required a sensitivity to the surrounding environment. In a similar vein, groups of children from the nurseries and preschools (whose ages ranged from two to six years) chose an area of interest in the Loris Malaguzzi Centre where, through “dialogues with places” (Reggio Children, 2008, p. 11) they engaged in designing a range of different art works in response to the unique qualities of that particular space. The processes of their subsequent explorations were exhibited in the Loris Malaguzzi Centre in a series of large panels. This documentation outlined how the children used their bodies, photography, sound, drawing and sculpture to represent their engagement, showing their awareness and spatial sensitivity with the surrounding environment. More importantly, the documentation revealed the children’s unique and “multiple ways of seeing, knowing and interpreting” (Fu, 2002, p. 22). Documentation of experiences such as these makes visible the learning processes of children engaging in meaning making, whilst also raising questions about children’s thinking and teachers’ teaching strategies. These experiences are seen as a visual memory, creating opportunities for children and teachers to revisit and reflect upon previous experiences, serving as an invitation or a catalyst to provoke further inquiry.

Why isn’t replication of Reggio Emilia appropriate within the New Zealand context?

Although Reggio Emilia pedagogy could be a source of inspiration for teachers, using it as a blueprint or a recipe that can be followed or replicated is strongly resisted. For example, Rinaldi and Moss (2004) argue that, “Reggio is not a stable model producing predetermined and predictable outcomes, but a place where questions and uncertainty, change and innovation are welcome” (p. 2). If we only see the outward results of the children’s work, and interpret this as ‘children making art’, rather than appreciating the broader pedagogical position of Reggio Emilia, then we can “miss the point” (Dahlberg, 2004, p. 22). Similarly, Robertson (2006) describes how “our gaze upon Reggio Emilia is often dazzled by the gems which bejewel the outward apparition, the sheer beauty of the environmental images that visitors’ encounter” (p. 152). The challenge therefore is to look beyond the gems and discover the “complexity of thought processes by



exploring new relationships with art, design, architecture, science, philosophy” (Dahlberg, 2004, p. 22).

A further reason for looking again is that despite the many examples of documentation from Reggio Emilia which illustrate children’s visual representations of their encounters with places and artists, the visual arts have not been chosen as a separate discipline. It is an approach based on a holistic philosophy rather than individual fields such as visual arts (Reggio Children, 2005; Reggio Children, 2008). Vecchi (2004) supports this argument by explaining that “[visual language] was chosen as a means to build bridges and relationships between different experiences and languages” (p. 19). If New Zealand teachers view visual arts experiences as a series of discrete practical ‘art activities’, then the rich potential for holistic learning and teaching could be lost.

Yet, it would be simplistic to think that the mere installation of an atelier and an atelierista within an early childhood centre can immediately instigate the depth and complexity of investigation inherent in the Reggio Emilia early childhood centres. The transformation is far more complex than the children’s work being displayed on the walls. The atelier was never intended to be a secluded privileged place where the expressive arts were confined and ‘taught’ (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998). Rather, it is a space that Loris Malaguzzi proclaims is “... a sort of aquarium that mirrors the ideas, values, attitudes, and cultures of the people who live within it” (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998, p. 177). Thus environments are not neutral or passive as they convey strong messages to children, families and communities about the learning that is valued in the context (Gould & Pohio, 2006). What then are the messages being relayed to children, families and communities about the learning that is valued in the early childhood settings.

How could Reggio Emilia pedagogy enhance visual arts education within the New Zealand context?

Teachers in New Zealand have begun to question more critically the position of visual arts education in early childhood settings and the role they play as teachers in relation to this (Wright, Ryder, & Mayo, 2007). McArdle (2003) describes this as “Teachers ... finding new ways to speak their practice” (p. 36). It is argued that publications from Reggio Emilia (Gandini, 2005; Gandini, Etheredge, & Hill, 2008; Reggio children, 2005; Reggio Children, 2008) and from local sources (Richards, 2009; Terreni, 2009; Visser, 2007) are providing an important repository of pedagogical information for new ways of ‘speaking practice’ to emerge. Whilst it is widely acknowledged that there has been a positional shift in teaching and learning in early childhood education from a developmentalist perspective to a sociocultural position (Anning, Cullen, & Fleer, 2004; Knight, 2008; Ministry of Education, 2004), a ‘stand back and watch’ approach in visual arts programmes continues to be firmly entrenched (Clark, 2007; Gunn, 2000; Terreni, 2009; Visser, 2007). This concept will continue to dominate visual arts education unless teachers take heed of the theoretical perspectives of teaching and learning that their practice reflects. As McArdle (2003) says:

Before making decisions about *what* to include in our [visual] arts programs, and *how* we will go about our work with the children, it is important to give some thought to *why* we make such decisions. Without some strong philosophical underpinnings, our visual art programs could be simply a series of ad hoc ‘activities’, or the slavish following of a formula (p. 36).



Recent publications show that early childhood teachers in New Zealand are beginning to recognise the complexity of thinking that children can reveal through the arts when teachers look beyond these experiences as being 'one off activities' (Wright, Ryder, & Mayo, 2007). One example of this is the 2009 publication *Kei Tua o te Pae* (MoE, 2009, book 19) that focuses specifically on The Arts (visual arts, dance, drama, music) in early childhood education. The increased visibility of these experiences places the spotlight directly on visual arts education which could encourage teachers to scrutinise their own visual art practices more closely. Ongoing engagement with the pedagogy of Reggio Emilia has contributed to this focus, whilst being mindful of centering these experiences within the New Zealand context.

Whilst not subject specific, the presence of the arts is strongly signaled throughout *Te Whāriki*. The visual arts, alongside, dance, drama, and music are seen as means for children to communicate their own experiences and to also "interpret the ways in which others communicate and represent experience" (p. 72). There is also a clear expectation that children are provided with an extensive range of tools, resources, and sustained opportunities to explore and investigate their creativity through the arts, acknowledging as Meiners (2005) asserts, "... that the arts offer significant ways of knowing...meaning making" (p. 38). The visual arts can provide children (and families) with effective pathways to navigate their way through the teaching and learning environment, providing a "meaningful and powerful conduit for hearing and seeing [their] voices" (p. 24). These stories describe how engaging the visual arts can increase the potential for communities in New Zealand, to look beyond themselves and enhance their understanding of their own and other cultures. However this is only possible when teachers take time to listen closely and to realise the multifaceted ways in which children can represent and transform their ideas. Advocating for teachers to explore the work of artists with children, adding to the complexity and richness of children's learning is also promoted (Fuemana-Foa'i et al, 2009). These explorations can encourage children to read and interpret the visual symbols and designs artists use, opening up other possibilities for their own art works. This resonates with educators in Reggio Emilia who speak of children reading their own and each others' art works, serving as a resource for further exploration and deepening of knowledge of a topic (Katz, 1998). When children have the opportunity to engage with artists both within the early childhood setting and in the local and wider community, this provides teachers with another lens to listen more acutely to children as they interact with these works. Visiting galleries and engaging collaboratively with artists in the community has also served to strengthen the view of the competent and confident child as "an aesthetic researcher" (Kolbe, 2005, p. 32).

Making connections through the visual arts

One such experience describes how teachers recognised a group of children's interest in patterns drawn from traditional Māori forms. The interest in kowhaiwhai designs in particular, initiated a raft of events both within and beyond the early childhood setting. This enabled the children and their families to explore the histories and narratives embedded within these forms, whilst also reflecting upon their own unique cultural experiences (Pohio, 2008). Another centre has explained how a growing awareness of an iconic local landmark, Rangitoto Island (a dormant volcano in the Hauraki Gulf, Auckland), provoked the children and teachers to embark on a mosaic project to design and create a sign depicting this prominent feature.



Inspiration for the mosaic sign was also gathered from several children who had begun to represent their perspectives through their paintings. This interest developed into a long term investigation where ideas drawn from the children, families and teachers, were collated within the design. The children actively engaged in working on the mosaic sign continued to sustain their involvement over several weeks. Projects such as these, have meaning and purpose for children and can make a significant and sustained contribution to the life and community of early childhood settings.

New Zealand based research undertaken by a *Centre of Innovation* (Wright, Ryder, & Mayo, 2007), investigated the ways in which: “visual art and a project approach to curriculum contributed towards building a community of learners in New Beginnings Preschool” (p.6). A key finding of this research project highlighted the notion that “visual art is more than being creative or having an experience. It is a tool that children use to persevere with projects, convey ideas and to work in collaboration with others” (p.9). This study amongst others, has contributed to the emergence of research pertaining to the visual arts, which is beginning to reflect the New Zealand context.

Conclusion

Questions need to be continued to be asked if the potential for teaching and learning, with the visual arts interwoven to create pathways for relationships are to be strengthened and enriched. If early childhood centres took a photo or presented a visual depiction of their centre and sent it across the world, would it be unique? Would it reflect the cultural context of New Zealand? Would the features of the local and wider community be reflected and embedded within the centre? Or could this be anywhere, being easily placed in America, Australia or Italy (Soutar (2007). Early childhood teachers need to avoid the cloning or replication which disguises the context and the unique qualities of place. Early childhood teachers can learn from the experiences of Reggio Emilia when reviewing their visual arts programmes, but keeping to the forefront their local connection. Increased engagement with the visual arts can provide one way for early childhood teachers within New Zealand to transform teaching and learning and make visible the sociocultural context in which they reside through weaving in collaborative play with children and communities, their own distinct *whāriki*.

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