



Commentary

The Wonders of Learning, The Hundred Languages of Children, Dialogues with Materials Conference and Exhibition, August – September 2010.

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Conference and Exhibition

It was an event to be celebrated: for the first time in Aotearoa New Zealand an exhibition from Reggio Emilia, Italy had arrived on our shores. This thought provoking and enlightening exhibition attracted over two thousand visitors while it was on display. I believe for the majority of us it was our dreams come true. For the organisers from the RE Provocations committee, a lot of hard work and determination paid off as they shared this amazing experience with New Zealanders.

From all corners of Aotearoa two hundred and ten dedicated early childhood professionals and people who believe in children, their rights and the value of early childhood education came together at the 'Dialogues with Materials' conference that accompanied the exhibition at Auckland's viaduct basin. Collectively we began an emotional and spiritual journey of discovery and exploration. Over three days those inspired, intrigued and challenged by the principles and practices of Reggio Emilia, Italy dialogued with one another and digested information delivered by guest speakers from Italy, Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand.

All four guest speakers at the conference provoked their audiences' thinking and challenged their practices. One challenge was to go beyond asking children questions that we already know the answer to, to asking questions that not only provoke, inspire and encourage their learning but also lead teachers to a better understanding of how children learn. Another challenge posed by speakers was to no longer accept the repetition of children making the same art product, such as chicks at Easter time or caterpillars from egg cartons. Teachers' were challenged to offer children many different art forms and experiences that provided opportunity for exploring, investigating and making sense of the world they live in.

History and Philosophy

The Reggio Emilia philosophy is by no means a recipe to copy down and repeat, as it arose from extraordinary circumstances following the devastation of WWII in Italy. A drive by partisans grew out of the peoples' desire to create a different kind of history for their children. Their determined efforts to establish a school for young children were founded in the hope that they would never experience the



atrocities of war. They wanted to create schools where children would flourish, where their individual rights would be respected and where children would be acknowledged as the youngest citizens.

Loris Malaguzzi (who later became the founding Director of the Preschools and Infant Toddler Centres Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia, Italy) heard of these happenings and rode through war torn countryside to the village of Villa Cella to find that women and children were helping to build the school with their bare hands. Malaguzzi has argued "... history can be changed, and is changed by taking possession of it, starting with the destiny of the children" (Malaguzzi, cited in Barazzoni, 2000, p14).

The Reggio system can be described succinctly as follows:

It is a collection of schools for young children in which each child's intellectual, emotional, social, and moral potentials are carefully cultivated and guided. The principal educational vehicle involves youngsters in long-term engrossing projects, which are carried out in a beautiful, healthy, love-filled setting. (Gardner, 1998, p. xvi).

Our Italian colleagues urge us to be inspired, to dialogue, to challenge and debate; to think critically, experience and explore the juxtaposition of the concepts of Reggio Emilia.

The role of Atelier and Atelierista in Reggio Emilia

The atelier is a specialist arts room designed to offer children the opportunity to experiment and use their creative imagination through extensive art experiences. The atelierista is a professional art teacher, often with an arts degree, who works in the atelier and supports the teaching team to extend the children in their creative experiences and opportunities.

The atelier is richly resourced and materials are easily accessible to children. I was fortunate to visit Reggio Emilia in 2009 and had several opportunities to experience ateliers and try to absorb the vast array of materials available to the children. An example of this was the many different shades of one colour paint in glass containers. Who would have thought there were so many shades of one colour, and what an extraordinary experience it is for children to have the opportunity to discover this variety.

In the atelier children are offered various pallets of materials to use as symbols of visual representation. This gives children the opportunity to express themselves using many different art forms. This interaction or dialogue with materials such as paint, clay and wire offers children additional languages through which they can express themselves. Children are respected as capable of achieving great things and therefore these environments offer resources that we would not often consider using with young children, such as wire, glass and ceramics.



Dialogues with Materials Exhibition

The 'Dialogues with Materials' exhibition which came to New Zealand is one section of a larger exhibition called 'The Wonder of Learning: The Hundred Languages of Children,' which is made up of six different exhibition sections. Within the 'Dialogues with Materials' exhibition there are four different projects: Black is made of all colours; White and white and white; Painting: between material and nature; and Sound systems. These projects explore the particular relationship between the language of an artist, Alberto Burri (an Italian abstract painter and sculptor), and the expressive languages of children (Reggio Children, 2004).

Conference guest speakers

The first guest speaker was Mirella Ruozi, formally an Atelierista now a Reggio Children consultant with the Municipal multimedia centre for the Infant Toddler Centres and Preschools Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia, Italy. Mirella opened the conference by sharing with us that she was personally involved in putting together the exhibition. She said the exhibition was initially an opportunity to share with children and their families the importance of education. It made the children's projects visible and created a place which would inspire discussion. Mirella explained that 'The Wonder of Learning: The Hundred Languages of Children' travels the world and is being discussed by many different cultures, adding: "It is the best possible communicative form to provoke discussion and confrontation from cultures all over the world". The exhibition graphically reveals the pedagogical premises of the Reggio Emilia approach.

Mirella spoke of the importance of documenting children's work as a strategy to give children a voice. Visually displaying the work allows adults to engage in discussion and reflect on the process of children's learning. She discussed children's capacity to create their own learning process. For example, the children come up with their own ideas and create their own working theories of how things work, and then want to try out these ideas. The role of the atelierista, in collaboration with the teachers, is to work with the children's hands and minds to make sure this happens.

Gillian McAuliffe, the Director of Bold Park Community School in Perth (catering for preschool, primary and college age students), presented from an Australian context. She set the scene by describing the school being situated in large grounds, including a lake, where children were exposed to the natural environment as an extension of their learning experiences. Gillian presented a project where the three year old children explored the natural materials in their environment. The project took the children and teachers on an exploratory journey to look at earth. They investigated the different colours and textures, and through actions such as grinding found they could transform the earth. Teachers removed painting equipment from the classroom so that children could focus solely on this one particular material. As a result, the children made pallets of many different colours from the earth and used them to paint with.

The third speaker of the day, Thelma Chapman from Awhi Whanau, Otara, South Auckland, reminded us to stay honest to who we were and to our cultural



context. She challenged us as educators involved with young children that we need to establish our identity, and acknowledge our values and beliefs, before we can know others and share with them. Thelma shared her personal journey as an educator inspired by Reggio Emilia principles and practices and reflected on the importance of that inspiration being brought into her cultural context in Aotearoa. She reminded us of the significance of our communities, whanau, parents and children and urged us to consider, in consultation and partnership, what is right for our particular centre environments. Thelma reminded us of the value of building relationships and creating a place of belonging, and acknowledged Tilly Reedy's (2003) powerful statement about our tamariki: "The child is the kawai tangata, the "genealogical link" that strengthens whanaungatanga, "family relationships," of that time and place" (p. 54).

Stefania Giamminuti, originally from Rome, Italy, now living and lecturing in Perth, Australia, opened the third and final day of the conference. I have had the pleasure of hearing Stefania present at a previous conference and was excited to have the opportunity to once again listen to her provocative presentation. Stefania encouraged us to create a culture of research in our centres, and to go to the next level of questioning with children in order to find out what they are thinking, so that we can provoke this thought to support and foster children's curiosity. She inspired us to think of ourselves as researchers constantly gathering information about how children learn. She also reminded us that Loris Malaguzzi said: "the child's world should be the world of the possible"

Stefania told us about a project on narrative and storytelling from Reggio Emilia where the whole class shared in one child's story. The child stood beside the OHP (overhead projector) and drew his story, which was projected onto a large white sheet so that the rest of the class, who were sitting in the room, could see. As he drew he told his story and sometimes the teacher or children would ask him questions. Can you imagine how many learning opportunities came from this experience for everyone involved? We want to be involved in children's learning journeys and share their experiences along the way; it is about process not the end product. How might this experience change a child's perception of the importance of his picture/story? How could it change the way we work alongside our young children?

The Workshops - My personal experiences (Day two)

On the second day of the conference participants were offered a variety of activities to choose from that included: viewing 'The Dialogues with Materials' exhibition, visiting three Reggio Emilia inspired early childhood centres in the Auckland area, or attending workshops. I opted to spend the entire day at workshops that were inspired by the exhibition. This was an opportunity to get hands on and interact with the materials. I attended three out of a total of six workshops.

Green workshop – This workshop, coordinated by Sarah Probine, used green tissue paper as a medium that could be manipulated and transformed to make a composition. The initial investigation grew out of a situation in the preschools of Reggio Emilia where each day the children used paper napkins at morning tea time to have their fruit from. The children were curious about their napkins and started to play with them. This was at first discouraged by the teachers, until



they observed the children's fascination and out of this grew an opportunity to explore and transform a simple but complex medium.

The workshop involved participants building a relationship with the green tissue paper while they transformed it by folding, twisting, screwing, plating and so on. It was a working example of how we can use simple resources found in our centres and everyday lives and transform them to create something quite remarkable. To finish off the workshop we displayed our creations together and collectively had a naming ceremony for each individual piece, creating 'an alphabet of green.'

White, white and white – This workshop, coordinated by Katja Fabig, offered participants the opportunity to work in one colour, or "monochromatically." It was interesting to work and create with white because previously I had thought there was only one white. With a palette of white laid before us it was obvious that there were many shades of white to work with. Additionally, in this workshop participants were able to work with a stethoscope, listening to the material and the sound it made, which was certainly an unusual and interesting experience. I wonder what children would think and how they would respond. It would be amazing to have the opportunity to explore these experiences with them.

Painting between material and nature – This workshop, coordinated by Kim Walker, inspired participants to see natural resources through new eyes, breaking down the material in order to transform it from its original state.

I was completely amazed by the incredible experience of transforming one piece of natural material and changing its existence, in this case a small bunch of moss. I spent three hours exploring the piece of moss, and to disconnect from my busy life I had to really focus on what I was doing. By letting go of everything else I was able to completely devote myself to developing a relationship with the moss. I felt its texture, examined and observed it; I listened to it and tasted it as I deconstructed and transformed the moss. This was a monumental moment for me, where the title of the exhibition 'Dialogues with Materials' became significant and personal: I was building a dialogue with this material.

The workshop was an extraordinary adventure and an opportunity for me to take the time to see beyond what I normally see. I wondered, is this how children explore and create meaning from the world they live in? How often do we offer children the time and opportunity to explore? How often do we give ourselves the time and opportunity to explore? I believe it is extremely important that we know and remember what it is like to use our senses and what it is like to be in a sense of wonder and mystery. I also question how we can work with children if we do not experience a sense of wonder, joy, curiosity and mystery.

As adults we need to give ourselves permission to play, allowing time, space and opportunities for our bodies and minds to re-enter the mysterious and imaginative world where children create. Let's not be absorbed by rules and regulations. Let's remember what it is like to once again live in the world of a child. It is vital that we experience the shared joy of discovery, the exhilaration of newness, and the extraordinary experience of amazement and wonder.



Conclusion

The 'Dialogue with Materials' conference and exhibition gave us an opportunity to revisit our identity, values and beliefs and challenged us to go deeper in our explorations with children. It also replenished that sense of wonder that often becomes lost in our busy lives. It taught us about discovering and building a dialogue with materials and, most of all, it encouraged us to see further possibilities when working with and alongside our young children.

I believe learning to see more means looking past the ordinary and seeing the extraordinary.

I would like to thank the RE Provocations committee for allowing me to write a commentary on the 'Dialogues with Materials' conference and exhibition.

References

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For further information on 'The Wonders of Learning: The Hundred Languages of Children. Dialogues with Materials' exhibition refer to the book above available from: reprovocations@gmail.com