

Primary Provocations Seminar

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Re-imagining Power, Intent and Practice in the Primary Years of School

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The Compass Not the Road - One School's Journey Towards Emergent Curriculum

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Reflection by Liz Battersby, April 2017

It has been intriguing to reflect on this thought-provoking day with Jill, Andrew, and Jade. They have each found ways to embrace Reggio-inspired practice in their different educational roles. Jill is an early childhood teacher and education consultant in NSW. Andrew is principal at Rolleston School in Christchurch. Jade is one of the early "pioneer" teachers involved in implementing a Reggio-inspired approach at Rolleston. I know from personal experience how powerfully encounters with the Reggio Emilia project can shake up teachers' thinking, capture the imagination, offer tantalising glimpses of what could be, and reward us with children's deep involvement in learning. Jill, Andrew, and Jade have experienced this shaking up, while taking their own Reggio journeys. Their ultimate joy in what they have discovered and their transformed practice would encourage any motivated educator who is seriously considering travelling this road. The benefits to children's learning are profound.

Jill, Andrew, and Jade have much in common. They are dedicated "border crossers" (Loris Malaguzzi) and researchers for whom 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." (Robertson, 2006). Their practice is founded on a strong image of the child as a competent protagonist for his or her own learning. They understand that the child "is in a permanent search for meaning". (Rinaldi, 2013). They practise co-constructivist pedagogy, intentionally seeking ways for young learners to be "in the zone" (Filippini, 2016), as they engage in meaningful learning. Undoubtedly, a significant "red thread" linking Jill, Andrew, and Jade is the "intentionality" of their practice (Filippini, 2016). Jill's meticulous exploration of re-imagining power, intent and practice in the primary years indicates strong intentionality. Andrew's wish to change the curriculum at Rolleston, his careful research, and consequent introduction of a Reggio-inspired approach suggest focused intentionality. Jade's authentic implementation of Reggio-inspired practice reflects thoughtful intentionality.

Jill calls herself the curious teacher, which she discusses in the book she co-authored with her colleague, Clare Britt, *Unearthing Why: Stories of thinking and learning with children* (2015). She has been on a constant journey of reflection, working to unravel the purpose of her life as a teacher. She sought answers to fundamental questions about how she could sustain the life and play and all that she loved as an early childhood teacher, when working in the context of a primary school. Perceiving there was more that connected than separated the world of early childhood and primary teachers, she endeavoured to find meaningful bridges between the two.

A curious educator will find ways to create bridges even when confronted with a wall, a notion suggested by Malaguzzi in his idea of the "eye jumping over the wall", and in his border crossing analogy. Jill realised that she and her primary school colleagues are connected by their passion for children's learning. Explaining that her thinking is strongly informed by what's under the surface, she uses the term "unearthing" and the metaphor of a tree fed by its root system to describe her search beneath the surface. This has involved her in shaking up the soil of what informs her practice, taking

her own journey, intentionally choosing to be curious rather than critical, and trying always to be open to new ideas.

Jill believes that children need an environment that promotes thinking and creative problem solving; an active environment, filled with agency, that empowers children to contribute significantly in their citizenship. She views schools as potential contexts for continual learning, critical thinking, complexity and multiple perspectives, risk-taking, citizenship, discovering many ways of knowing, social construction of knowledge, and “floundering intelligently” (Claxton, 2014). Jill understands that a commitment to Reggio-inspired practice can be eroded by such elements of the school environment as demands on time and energy, the need to provide evidence of children’s learning in standardised tests, not being able to see our future, and resistance to change. However, she believes that these obstacles can be countered. She finds that despite the demands, there is much more energy to sustain her as a teacher, when there is joy.

For Jill, the journey from critical to curious has involved both confronting and embracing uncertainty. This means learning to listen, walking alongside, accepting failure, and finding joy. As she has persisted, her journey has been intentional, not accidental. For Jill, and for Andrew and Jade, being “in dialogue with Reggio Emilia” has brought “*the gift of insight – of making new connections – which is there for anyone who persists, experiments and explores.*” (Ferguson, 2000).

Jill researched the elements of a learning environment in which children could flourish. She is concerned that the children in her care spend so many hours with her, wondering if she is honouring this, and if she is giving them time to flourish. Her beautiful stories about the children indicate just how well they are flourishing, and the real joy that sustains her teaching. As she strives to ensure that the learning environment is one in which everyone feels connected, she exemplifies Carla Rinaldi’s assertion,

To feel a sense of belonging, to be part of a larger endeavour, to share meanings – these are the rights of everyone involved in the educational process, whether teachers, children or parents.

Rinaldi, C. 1998

Deep engagement with the Reggio Emilia project has been pivotal to Jill’s development as a teacher, as it has been for Andrew and Jade. All three have come to see “the extraordinary in the ordinary” that is so central to Reggio pedagogy, initiated as it was by ordinary people who were extraordinarily intentional, able to distil the essence of what is important for their children’s future education. The challenge for Jill, and for all of us today, is that we are not in the situation of the Reggio founders in 1945, standing in the ruins of war, having to begin again.

Reggio is a clarifying “lens” for Jill, Andrew and Jade. As with the Reggio founders, the approach offered each of them,

...new ways to think about the nature of the child as a learner, the role of the teacher, school organisation and management, the design and use of physical environments, and curriculum planning that guides experiences of joint, open-ended discovery and constructive posing and solving of problems.

Edwards, C., Gandini, L., Forman, G., (Eds). 1998

Jill asserts that our “image of the child” significantly influences our teaching, and that by taking the time to “re-imagine” children, we would see their competencies. We would re-imagine them as active (authors) rather than passive (readers), strong rather than weak, complex rather than simple,

interdependent rather than dependent, wired for relationship rather than egocentric. After reflecting on what it would look like to re-imagine the children in her classroom according to this powerful image, she concluded that to achieve a co-constructivist relationship with the children would require a re-imagining of teaching, too. So, the teacher would be walking alongside rather than standing at the front, listening rather than talking, responding rather than instructing, a collaborator rather than a provider, a community advocate rather than a surveillance officer. This view of teaching has the potential to transform practice, and requires that teachers are learners, too, *“constantly modifying their hypotheses, predictions, and interpretations as the children’s projects develop.”* (Reggio Children, 2001).

The Reggio Emilia belief in the pedagogy of listening is vital to Jill’s practice. For her, listening is an act that embraces uncertainty. She illustrated the notion of “the hundred languages of children” with Claudia Giudici’s incisive words:

When we speak of languages we refer to the different ways children (human beings) represent, communicate, and express their thinking in different media and symbolic systems; languages, therefore are the many fonts or geneses of knowledge.

Giudici, C. 2010

Jill offered her understanding of the Reggio educators’ practice of Documentation and Progettazione. Believing that education is a public act that should not be hidden, she understands the significance of pedagogical documentation as a powerful means of advocacy, as well as a research process, aptly calling it “a journey of co-research”. She shares the Reggio view of documentation as making *“the life of the school and community understandable, visible, discussable and shareable with other people.”* (Giacopini, 2007). Jill finds that the process of making learning visible invites dialogue, creates openness, shows a willingness for discussion, makes us more exposed and vulnerable as teachers, allows for revisiting, rethinking, and reflection, and positions us as researchers.

Jill, Andrew and Jade exemplify Giacopini’s assertion that documentation should be “alive and vibrant” (ibid). Their joy in teaching, and their wonderful descriptions, documentation and images of the children’s learning, demonstrate their deep awareness of that specifically Reggio concept, “Progettazione”. This is no mean feat, as progettazione is a word that the Reggio educators intentionally do not translate from the Italian, for they have their own profound perception of the concept, and are adamant that our English word “project” is not an adequate fit.

Progettazione is a strategy of thought and action that is respectful and supportive of the learning processes of the children and the adults; it accepts doubts, uncertainty, and error as resources...It is carried out by means of processes of observation, documentation, and interpretation in a recursive relationship.

Reggio Children, 2010

The concept of Progettazione reflects a co-constructivist approach that is vital to Jill, Andrew and Jade, as they strive *“to create a fluid and dynamic relationship between learning and teaching”* (Filippini, ibid). For them, *“documentation is not simply there to inform people; it is there to involve people.”* (Giacopini, E. 2007).

Jill advocates the idea of “active encounter”, believing that learning is what happens in encounters with ideas, people, materials. She co-constructs a context that creates myriad possibilities for encounters. She suggests that Reggio offers us a lens to look closely at power, noting that the teachers there have drawn our attention to some significant matters. She provokes teachers to consider several questions about the learning environments we provide for children. Each question is worthy of deep

contemplation. She asks, do our environments: Enable or restrict access and independence? Invite or restrain collaboration and problem solving? Inspire, bore or stress learners? Reflect, or work against, our values? Invite curiosity and wonder? Recognise different points of view? Allow for different learning styles and personal needs? Create possibilities for a range of experiences and a variety of groupings? Carry traces of tenderness? Support relationships and the social construction of knowledge? Jill also asks if teachers talk to children about the culture of respect they expect in their classroom.

Re-imagining our image of the child and of teaching, means re-imagining our curriculum as one of possibility, Jill says. She illustrated this with examples from her own classroom, where her goal is to implement a curriculum that is process-driven, meaning-centred, co-designed, responsive, and evolving. Any teacher keen to integrate a Reggio-inspired approach in a primary school context would understand that in such an environment, decisions would be made by adults and children alike. The curriculum would be negotiated between the children and teachers, who would be mindful of what is vital for children to thrive. As Jill explained, an “emergent” curriculum evolves, takes new paths according to choices and connections made, and is open to new possibilities that had not initially been envisaged.

An emergent curriculum offers wonderful surprises and insights along the way, which Jill and Jade illustrated with stories from the classroom. Jade referred to “unexpected pathways” that highlighted children’s profound curiosity and insight. When Jill deduced that her class was especially curious about the human body, she offered the children relevant books from the library. She encouraged them to find something that fascinated them and to represent it with materials of their own choosing. The emergent curriculum, along with perceptive documentation that makes children’s learning visible, demonstrates how much their work and thinking are valued. This can be self-motivating, as Jill, Andrew and Jade have found. They understand that to be successful in negotiating the curriculum with children, teachers need ample time to reflect. Jill describes the power of documenting children’s learning in offering children, teachers and parents a window for reflection.

By recording children’s ideas through any form of documentation we hope to validate and affirm their input, making their thinking visible to others. Records also allow for revisiting of ideas, allowing investigations to be re-opened.

McLachlan, J. 2017

To support teachers with understanding Reggio, Jill suggested a series of significant “questions to have in your pocket”, proposed by Daniela Lanzi (2013):

How do children acquire knowledge?

How do children process and organise knowledge?

How do children carry out research?

How do teachers increase their knowledge together with the children?

How can we enable children to encounter/engage with different points of view?

When asked how a teacher would know if documentation is good, Lanzi recommended asking oneself three questions: What did I want to narrate? What did I wish the reader to understand? What did I learn? She contends that if each of these questions is considered, then “we can say it is beautiful documentation” (ibid). There is just such beauty in Jill and Jade’s documentation.

Jill commented on some crucial principles of a co-constructivist environment - the building of trust, being a curious teacher, prioritising commitment over compliance, embracing uncertainty, and welcoming disruption. Jill, Andrew and Jade embody these principles. Andrew has worked assiduously

to build trust at Rolleston. He confesses that Reggio alone keeps him fully in touch with teaching and learning. Prompted by his discussions with Rolleston's junior school teachers about the limitations of inquiry-based learning, and encouraged by a friend to investigate Reggio, he attended a study tour to Reggio Emilia in 2009. Inspired by all that he learned there, he successfully explored a Reggio-inspired approach with the junior school staff. Believing that "good practice with five-year-olds is good practice with 12-year-olds", he found that the rest of the staff soon became enthusiastically involved, too. Parent feedback indicates strong support, and two ERO reviews have affirmed the excellent practice that has developed at Rolleston with Andrew's encouragement. In 2015, ERO commented on the high quality student engagement, thinking, inquiry, and problem-solving. They pointed out the effective implementation of a Reggio Emilia-inspired approach, noting that the flexible, responsive curriculum,

Encourages complexity and depth of student thinking.

Is well documented and displayed to show student learning in action, including the many ways learning is occurring, challenged and supported by teachers.

Provides rich learning environments and opportunities that are well resourced, meaningful and based on student learning and ideas.

Clearly, the children at Rolleston are flourishing. Andrew and the staff are excited to have started this journey with the children, for "there are many miles left for us be surprised and enriched by as teachers, as we take time through the walking." Affirming Jill's comments, he cherishes the gift of time, which he believes has made Rolleston's Reggio journey so successful. There is a strong sense of trust as he and the staff explore Reggio pedagogy and its curriculum of possibilities together. He asks teachers not to plan units, but to explore the idea of an emergent curriculum from the children's interests. He acknowledges that this can be challenging for teachers, but their obvious trust in him is leading them to embrace uncertainty, despite possible fears.

Andrew's metaphor of the Rolleston engagement with the Reggio Emilia project as choosing to travel by the compass, rather than a predictable road, is fitting. As he joyfully said, "If you choose to travel cross country using a compass, who knows where you might end up?" He agrees with Jill that it is vital for children and teachers to experience joy, which he thinks is possible if children are allowed to lead. For those daunted by the teaching and learning changes achieved at Rolleston, he encourages schools to try to work this way. His vision for a better curriculum shows what is possible.

Jade's presentation on the Pet Day project with the Y5 students at Rolleston would inspire even the most hesitant teacher to embrace Reggio pedagogy. Following a REANZ study tour to Reggio Emilia in April 2016, Jade spent considerable time thinking. She determined to reach a deeper level with the children, and to foster empathetic thinking. The children became immersed in remarkable, invaluable learning that spanned a full year, and robustly embraced all areas of the curriculum - connecting deftly to relevant Key Competencies. From determining the children's initial thinking, to offering thoughtful provocations, to noticing the unexpected pathways the project sometimes took, Jade and the children travelled by the compass. Allowing them the gift of time, she walked alongside them, welcoming their original thinking. Understanding the Reggio notion of reciprocal listening, Jade asked questions to discover children's ideas, hypotheses and theories, reconciling their current "working theories" about the world and what they were on the verge of coming to know. She aptly referred to Malaguzzi's idea of the child tossing a ball to us, which we toss back, "adding our own interesting resources".

Jade encourages the children to be "active participants in life" - aware, competent at forming opinions, and making decisions about difficult issues. With this in mind, she offered the children a confronting provocation about our attitudes towards animals that led to deep learning, presenting them with an

image of elephants' tusks being burned in Kenya. Initially, the children could not comprehend what they were seeing, even though this matter was being widely reported in the news. Many of the children thought they were looking at huts burning. They offered their theories about the elephants' tusks, including some misconceptions, all of which were robustly discussed. At the end of this discussion, some children were still not able to accept what they were seeing, but all were able to justify their reasoning, and accept and respond to the challenges of others. With the gift of time and Jade's skilful guidance, they were able to study a disturbing ethical issue in considerable depth.

Jade sometimes finds that "the eye jumps over the wall" and an unexpected pathway beckons. If it isn't possible to pursue new ideas when they arise, she makes a note in case there is time to revisit them later. She described some fascinating unexpected pathways that she did follow with the children. One emerged when she became aware that the children had started to use the word "invention". In the ensuing discussion, a small group expressed and amended their theories about the concept of an invention. One child had thought that an "invent" was an event, like the Olympics. A second asked if everything was an invention, as everything has to be made. The first child responded that God made everything, and a third joined in, saying he thought that football was an invention. A fourth then queried, "But is it not made of metal and stuff?" To which the third child replied, "No. I think football is, too. It wasn't just there. Someone had to think and make it up." Then a fifth child, asked an intriguing question, "If a soccer pitch, soccer field, and a soccer ball are inventions, how can the game not be an invention?" This led to a shared definition of "invention" and the subsequent exploration of what inventions had been created for pets.

The project culminated in a wonderful Pet Day at the end of the year. Jade says she learned to look for the deeper levels in a project, to explore "opportunities for children to practise for life", and to seek "every opportunity to provoke the interests of children across the curriculum". She discovered "power in asking children to identify and choose the learning and skill development that is, and could take place within a project". She believes it is essential to avoid making "assumptions about what children know and think", and to "ask the right questions, listen and observe". She found, too, that "topics that may have been shallow and short-lived in traditional settings, can be highly engaging and meaningful with a Reggio lens".

Andrew commented that a short presentation could not do the Pet Day project justice. He acknowledges that it is very challenging for teachers to be asked to step away from what they know and to allow children's voices to be the driving force. However, while time might have been limited for Jade to explain the project in detail, I was delighted with the vignettes she shared that depicted Reggio-inspired pedagogy so superbly.

Reflecting on the Rolleston experience, Jill referred to a Reggio Emilia teacher's comment that if you give up your structure you have to think a lot. She concluded that rigour and sophisticated thinking can be joyful. She, like Andrew and Jade, sees her colleagues and herself as "teachers with agency, stretched towards better and more collaborative thinking". She believes that children who have a strong voice develop a capacity to express themselves in another environment, so when they move on to secondary school, after being immersed in a Reggio-inspired primary school, they will flourish. I firmly believe that is so with ethical teachers like Jill, Andrew and Jade walking and exploring the world alongside children. Their unique gaze on the Reggio educational experience illuminates a wonderful cultural knot, and perhaps will entice others to join them in becoming ardent border crossers.

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