

## **When your dance and my dance are entwined**

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*He aha te mea nui o te ao?*

*He tangata! He tangata! He tangata!*

What is the most important thing in the world?

It is people! It is people! It is people!

-Māori proverb

### **Abstract**

This project dialogue examined how an emerging sense of dance identity might enhance a child's awareness of and feeling of belonging in the world. It presented interviews with children that explored Clare Battersby's long-held belief that children's evolving sense of self develops and is empowered through their experience of an inclusive approach to dance. Here they are challenged and experience joy and success. This approach is rooted in contemporary dance theory, educational pedagogy, and theatre performance. It has no syllabus or examinations, but, rather, a co-constructed emergent curriculum. Every child is welcome in the class, which caters to their interests and abilities through collaboration between the teacher and participating children.

*Keywords:* identity, collaboration, joy, competent child, Reggio Emilia

### **The Project**

This research project focused on Clare Battersby's community dance classes for 4-7-year-old children from different cultures and backgrounds at TAPAC, a performing arts studio in Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand. Through interviews with children from the class and their parents, we researched the following questions: What

brings them to dance class? What are their perceptions about dance? Who are the children when they come into the shared dance space? How could a community dance class contribute to an emerging “dancing identity” over time?

Through the presentation of photographs and videos that focused on Clare’s “porous” (Brown, 2015) teaching approach, we revealed dance identities developing through the inter-relationship between the child, other children in the class, the dance space, and the teacher. Our “twist” was that, as a class, the link between the child’s home and the studio creates a third space — a fluid, liminal space that is not restricted by its physical environment — one that offers the child a context for expression and embodied awareness through which their moving identity finds its coordinates.

One way in which the class is both porous and liminal is through the inclusion of parents as witnesses in the dance studio. Educators attending our daCi 2015 project dialogue presentation expressed surprise that parents and caregivers watch the class. Indeed, they watch and are drawn into interactions with their children at the end of the class. A parent or caregiver might be invited to engage with their child by touch, by attending to their child as the destination for a jumping sequence, or by participating in a mobile architecture for the children’s unfolding dance over, under, and around. These forms of participation build a conversation between the teacher, children, and parents, reinforcing bonds and inviting playful interaction. Attachment theory identifies the importance of the secure base, which in this context is the parent-child relationship. Clare creates an environment for children that is secure, yet allows them to enter into a liminal, third space where anything can happen, and it does. What emerges is sparked by the children’s interests and the world around them. In Aotearoa New Zealand, this emergent identity is strongly influenced by a Māori worldview and what Marsden (2003) calls a “woven universe.” Pakeha educator Adrienne Sansom (2011) captures this sensibility:

Everything is intertwined. The tinana (body), the hinengaro (mind), and the wairua (spirit) are joined as one. (p. 106)

Besides drawing on New Zealand’s cultural heritages, with their strong affinities to a sense of place, Clare also draws influence from pedagogies of child-centered learning. In her classes, the image of the child held by the teacher is that of a competent learner bursting with creativity, spontaneity, and potential, not a vessel to

be filled with a new or foreign practice. Others attending the presentation noted how challenging it could be working with this very young age group. We called it “framed chaos,” reiterating the central principle of Clare’s approach — that of not just looking and listening to children, but *really* looking and listening to children.

### **Reflection on the Project**

At the end of our research, Liz Battersby reflected on all that she had observed and discussed with Clare during the project, using a Reggio Emilia “lens” to support that reflection. The Reggio Emilia pedagogy evolved over time, since its humble but resolute beginnings at the end of World War II. Key principles underpin the approach, and Liz observed these in Clare’s practice. She found it illuminating to discover how much the Reggio Emilia spirit is infused into Clare’s pedagogy.

The Reggio Emilia approach begins with an exceptional **image of the child** as a protagonist for his or her own learning.

It’s necessary that we believe that the child is very intelligent, that the child is strong and beautiful and has very ambitious desires and requests. (Malaguzzi, 1994, p. 56)

Teachers who hold this image are attuned to the child’s emerging sense of identity. Liz learned that the notion of **identity** has particular significance to the language of dance, having observed how vital identity is to Clare’s strong image of each child attending her dance classes. Reggio Emilia educators express a passionate belief in the **competent child** who is “amazing and the essence of the Reggio experience” (Rinaldi, 2013). Rinaldi thinks that the word competent is an unusual word for describing a child, suggesting that when people talk about a competent person, they are usually referring to an adult. She notes a tendency for a child, particularly a baby, to be described as adorable or cute, and considered weak and needy, with the focus on what the child cannot do, rather than what the child can do.

Clare’s classes are founded on a belief in the competence of each child and they provide richly challenging, carefully scaffolded learning opportunities. This was illustrated for Liz in the sense of agency two of the children demonstrated when they offered their ideas for *Between the Tides*, a local community performance on the

mudflats of the harbour. One child expressed his strong ideas for the choreography in a conversation with his mother:

It would be a good idea to put brown paper over our heads so we'd be camouflaged ... we'd look like just moving mud ... your knees would have something to cover them and you'd creep up like this, quite slowly ... then the music could speed up and so could we, because we're the creatures coming out of the mud and coming to life.

Liz witnessed a further example when another child offered his ideas for a dance to be performed at Fly the Fairy — a fundraising event that TAPAC held in its theatre to support Clare's presentation at daCi 2015, and that members of the Auckland performing arts community generously supported. This child knew he would be dancing with his brother, another child, and a professional dancer in front of a largely unknown audience. He could confidently explain his ideas about how they could portray flying Clare in a plane to Copenhagen. Following the performance, he wrote about his experience of the dance and represented it graphically in a detailed, vibrant drawing (Image 1). His engagement in the process of creating, performing, and reflecting on the dance suggests a repositioning of the teacher and represents the "agency of the child (who is in the position of teaching)" (Sansom, 2013, p. 4).

Both of these examples viewed through a Reggio lens would perceive the teacher and children as co-protagonists in learning. Clare collaborates with them as they co-construct an emergent curriculum that builds upon their interests and ideas, reflecting her innate understanding of Rinaldi's belief that "the potential of children is stunted when the endpoint of their learning is formulated in advance" (Rinaldi, 1998, p. 118). In complete harmony with the Reggio approach, the children's ideas are mobilized into a project, where a child can experience what the other children are creating, and, as Howard Gardner (1992) said of a project he observed in Reggio Emilia, "When you work together, you end up producing something, which is greater than any individual parts."



Image 1. A child's graphic representation of the *Fly the Fairy* dance.<sup>1</sup>

Photography by Liz Battersby.

In Reggio Emilia, the notion of **the hundred languages** comprises many forms of expression, including speaking, movement, dance, drawing, painting, and music, through which children communicate and learn about their world. When various media are combined to tell a story, they form the hundred languages (Forman and Fyfe, 1998, p. 249). We can see every child's potential in the remarkable art, interactions, curiosity, thinking, and concentration of the children in Reggio Emilia.

Liz observed how competently — and often joyfully — the children in Clare's classes express themselves through dance and movement. The ideas explored in class are a trigger for one child to create performances at home with her siblings. Her mother's description of these experiences and an interview with the child indicate that she is processing the ideas from dance class to create her own performance that integrates her ideas about choreography, stage, and set. This child's encounters with the languages of dance and movement are leading to an exploration of the languages of design, acting, and drama. She delights in and contributes significant ideas for the performances that Clare and the children create and perform together (Image 2).

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<sup>1</sup> Graphic representation of *Fly the Fairy* dance performed at TAPAC performing arts centre, Auckland, drawn by one of the children involved in the research project, 2015.



Image 2. The children collaborate with Clare to create their performances.<sup>2</sup>

Photography by Guy Quartermain.

A guiding principle of the Reggio approach is embedded in the phrase **nothing without joy**. This is evident in Clare’s classes, where the concept embraces the joy of dance when a child leaps elatedly across the studio, or when two children collaborate to embody “mudcreepers” sliding along the mudflats. The concept also embraces the joy associated with overcoming a challenge, which we saw when a child struggled with and then resolved issues within a piece of choreography he had in mind. As children continually engage with dancing, the potential for experiencing joy perhaps motivates them to pursue and persevere with new possibilities.

The foundations of a child’s learning begin with parents — their first teachers — and are enhanced with excellent teaching from their second teachers, whether in a classroom or a dance studio. The Reggio Emilia notion of the **environment as the third teacher** further enhances their learning. As mentioned earlier, it is important for Clare that parents participate in their child’s dance experience. Liz observed how she gently involves them, encouraging them to interact with their children before a lesson finishes. Clare pays careful attention to the quality and educational possibilities of space, creating an appealing environment for children’s learning, one where children

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<sup>2</sup> Children collaborating with Clare Battersby for a performance at TAPAC performing arts centre, Auckland. © 2014 Guy Quartermain.

are welcomed and empowered and the Reggio principle of nothing without joy is palpable. For the *Between the Tides* performance, the stage was the mudflats, an environment of mud, sea, and sand — a unique place to perform. Following two children’s discussion with Clare about how they could come out of the mud, one of the children suggested that he and the other child would be “mudcreepers.” As previously described, one child wrote about how they would emerge from the mud wearing paper bags on their heads so that they couldn’t be identified as people. Both children then created the choreography for the mudcreepers’ demeanour, movement, and dance.



Image 3. A “mudcreeper” dances at *Between the Tides*.<sup>3</sup>

Photography by Liz Battersby.

Liz noted Clare’s understanding of the Reggio concept of **the pedagogy of listening**, giving children time, and listening deeply. The pedagogy of listening embraces reciprocity and love, a poignant illustration of which occurred when one child taught a piece of choreography to another child. They were remarkably tender and in tune with one another, reflecting the atmosphere of respect and warmth Clare engenders, and her image of the competent child. When the mother of one of the children witnessed the pair dancing, she was so touched she cried tears of joy for her

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<sup>3</sup> Child involved in the research project performing at *Between the Tides*, a local community performance, Auckland. © 2015 Elizabeth Battersby.

child, who had shown through her dancing her competence in learning, communicating, and trusting.

### Conclusion

We observed the children's sense of empowerment when they created choreography and their dance connected with others. We witnessed how pedagogy that builds children's love of dance could also offer them a platform to express themselves. Brown (2015) described Clare's practice as "porous around the edges," a view supported by our research. Clare's co-constructing of the curriculum with the children and her sensitive involvement of parents enhance the experience for the teacher, the children, and their parents who come to intimately share in their child's sense of an emergent dance identity.

We would be curious to revisit these protagonists in three years' time to document further how their sense of a dance identity has evolved.

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**Clare Battersby** holds a Dip T: Graduate Diploma in movement and dance from the University of Melbourne. She is known across New Zealand for her expertise in young children's dance. She is also widely known as her alter ego, FairyClare, developing shows for children about nature, which she has performed in Botanic gardens around the world. She regularly presents at conferences in Australia and New Zealand. She teaches dance to children in a range of settings in Auckland and trains teachers from around New Zealand, previously being on staff at the University of Auckland.

**Liz Battersby**, MA, Dip. Tchg., Education Consultant, Auckland, New Zealand. She was a primary school teacher before becoming a primary school principal for 22 years. She now works as a consultant, assisting families with their children's learning, and mentoring teachers with integrating a Reggio Emilia approach into their practice. She writes reviews of speakers' presentations for the website of Reggio Emilia, Aotearoa New Zealand (REANZ). She is very interested in learning more about children's dance education and what connections there might be between the pedagogy of Reggio Emilia and that of creative contemporary dance.

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