The Construction Site Project: Transforming Early Childhood Teacher Practice

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The Construction Site Project: Transforming Early Childhood Teacher Practice

The work of Malaguzzi (in Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998; Fraser, 2006) has made the fundamentals of the preschools of Reggio Emilia familiar to many early childhood educators. The article describes an authentic project that enhanced undergraduate and postgraduate participants’ understanding of the impact of collaboration, conversation, and documentation. Through this experience, participants came to see these concepts as significant elements in reflective teacher practice.

We are two Canadian early childhood teacher educators who worked with a combined group of 16 undergraduates and four postgraduates to explore fresh possibilities in expanding our use of the principles of Reggio Emilia preschools (Fraser, 2006; Katz, 1994). We were interested in developing the principles in both our practice as teacher educators and in students’ work with young children. In the past, we had collaborated to merge undergraduate and postgraduate sections of early childhood education courses in which we emphasized Reggio principles such as relationships, reciprocity, and environment as third teacher. In this article, we describe how making connections between progettazione or flexible planning (Rinaldi, 1998), conversation (Cadwell & Fyfe, 2004), collaboration (Gambetti, 2001), documentation (Rinaldi, 1998), and relational space (Ceppi & Zini, 1998/2001) influenced our teaching practice in a compressed summer school offering.

The work of transforming practice through dialogue and reflection is of interest not only to us, but also to other teacher educators (Kocher, 2006; Merrill-Palmer Institute, 2006; Project Zero, 2004). The process of examining personal theories that results from shared experiences seems to lead to a greater awareness of possibilities for change. Malaguzzi (1998a) believed that
these personal theories are intimately connected to practice:

It is well known how we all proceed as if we had one or more theories. The same happens for teachers: Whether they know it or not, they think and act according to personal theories. The point is how those personal theories are connected with the education of children, with relationships within the school, and with the organization of work. In general, when colleagues work closely together to share common problems, this facilitates the modification of behaviors and the modification of personal theory. (p. 86)

The following section describes how we collaborated using dialogue and reflection with class participants as they examined personal theories and teaching practice.

Description of the Summer Session Courses

The undergraduate course, Introduction to Preschool Settings, and the postgraduate course, Critical Perspectives on Preschool Education, were taught together. Participants and instructors met for 4 weeks, 4 days a week, in half-day sessions. To live the principles of Reggio Emilia in an authentic manner during the class sessions, we had to be open to the experiences of the participants, making spaces for their ideas as the courses evolved, rather than dictating a specific outcome. As Kocher (2006) pointed out, "The way in which Reggio Emilia teachers use their professional development time reflects the belief that adults as well as children need opportunities for sharing, experimenting, revolting, building theory, and constructing knowledge about the world in which they work" (para. 3).

Our preplanning for each week and the actual experiences are described in Table 1. In this context, "child-generated project" refers both to "an in-depth study of a particular topic that one or more children undertake" (Katz & Chard, 1989, p. 2) and to a process in which participants spend time with a group of children—observing, conversing, listening, and interacting to plan projects that build on the children’s interests (Jones & Nimmo, 1995). The project becomes the focus for documentation that is to be shared with other participants, and with the children.

The role of the four postgraduates evolved into that of pedagogistas: experienced Reggio teachers who work collegially with practitioners as part of a pedagogical team to exchange new information about advances in theories of practice (Filippini, 1998). The postgraduates were to serve as guides to the undergraduates, providing links between practical professional knowledge and the new theories constructed by the team through the combined courses.

We used a "table group" structure so that participants got to know each other, established relationships, and had time to talk with each other. We made a conscious decision to focus on conversation, collaboration, and documentation not only because of our own transformative experiences during and following a study tour to Reggio Emilia, but because we believed that these three elements are powerful tools in creating meaningful experiences for diverse groups of learners (Krechevsky & Mardell, 2001). We realized that the synergy resulting from the interaction of these concepts in our own professional practice had powerful results for us. The perspective we took when co-constructing knowledge with adult learners is compatible with the philosophy underpinning the work of Project Zero: "The type of learning in which we are interested engages students cognitively, emotionally, and aesthetically. It is situated in real-world problem solving that draws on critical and creative thinking as well as disciplinary knowledge and skills" (2004, Key Ideas and Questions, paragraph 2).

Students in previous courses reported that their learning had been enhanced because of the insights they gained through class conversations and the documentation process. Collaboration flowed naturally from this responsive, trusting interplay of ideas and experiences (Goulet, Krentz, & Christiansen, 2003). Reflecting on that experience, one participant realized the following:

Our table discussions were very powerful in developing a research community. The format used (one
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Timeframe</th>
<th>Intentions</th>
<th>Lived Experiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Week 1</td>
<td>Immersion in the literature about Reggio Emilia with an introduction to the work of Carla Rinaldi, Lella Gandini, Susan Fraser, and others</td>
<td>We introduced videos, structured discussion around provocative quotes, and responded to questions. Groups presented chapters from the textbook and other readings. They generated questions to engage the class in processing textual content. This infusion of new information and ideas was important as participants made connections through dialogue. To create a learning community characterized by common understandings, we encouraged participants to link their practical experiences with the assigned readings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 2</td>
<td>Preparation for child-generated projects and related documentation</td>
<td>The focus was learning more about projects or in-depth investigations (Katz &amp; Chard, 1989), developing an understanding of the elements of documentation, and preparing for the final assignment. When we taught these courses previously, children were involved early in the semester’s activities. Consequently, the adults had no opportunity to experience a project developed with their peers. This meant that the adults lacked experience constructing curriculum in a social context (Project Zero, 2004) and building on children’s interests. We had expected earlier participants to use the principle of progettazione without experiencing the process for themselves. In this summer session, we engaged in an authentic inquiry in preparation for the child-generated project.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Week 3</td>
<td>Implementation of child-generated project; development of documentation</td>
<td>Participants spent time with children off-campus developing, implementing, and documenting a project. Participants were expected to use their observations of children’s interests as a starting point and to build on Reggio principles of conversation, collaboration, and documentation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Week 4</td>
<td>Display and discussion of documentation; debriefing of the learning experience</td>
<td>We organized the final week so that participants had time to display and discuss the documentation of the projects developed with children. This afforded us, as instructors, an opportunity to link theoretical perspectives with the pivotal experience of the whole class investigation to authentic practice with young children.</td>
</tr>
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speaker recognized and allowed to speak at a time resulted in not only everybody participating/contributing in a non-threatening atmosphere, but more importantly, in a respectful environment. Coming from a person whose gender represented only 5% of the classroom population, and whose experience/knowledge of the subject matter paled greatly in comparison to others in the class, I never felt uncomfortable.

When participants returned to the classroom each Monday, they found the tables and chairs arranged so that five individuals sat together as conversation partners for the week. These groupings changed weekly so that all participants had an opportunity to interact with each other over time.

We used another structure, the “talking circle,” to encourage conversation in small groups. A prop, in our case a stalk of wheat, was used to manage the flow of conversation. The participant holding the stalk of wheat was the speaker. One participant noted the importance of these reflective conversations:

It was particularly helpful because a lot of times it made me think of something that gave me a different perspective and made me think of something I hadn’t already thought of and definitely would give me time to go back and reflect in a different way — outside of my own thinking. That was really helpful. . . . When learning has a purpose, I think that gives me the drive to want to learn more and be challenged.

Taguchi (2006) suggested that this type of thinking is an instance of resistance-conscious acts of thinking deeply about the assumptions and taken-for-granted notions we bring with us. As we were establishing the classroom ambience, we made a conscious effort to be adaptable, to modify our own plans and goals for learners, and to continuously challenge ourselves through multiple interpretations of points raised in discussion. Through past experience, we learned that working with children was not enough to cement learners’ ideas of what it means to co-construct curriculum. It was vitally important that adults had the time and space to actively participate in the generative process of planning, doing, reflecting, and documenting their project prior to using the approach in their practice. We also knew that simply conveying the information about coconstructing curriculum was not appropriate if we were to be consistent with our interpretation of Reggio principles.

Our unfolding experiences underscored our agreement with the theory and practice of Ann Pelo and her colleagues at Hilltop Children’s Center. Pelo (cited in Carter & Curtis, 1997) stated the following:

We view curriculum as everything that happens during our time together with children. We believe that each moment offers an opportunity to explore relationships and to create a community that nurtures children, teachers, and families. Each moment holds a range of feelings and interests. There are always questions to pursue, hypotheses to investigate, and discoveries to celebrate. Curriculum happens all day, in every routine, action, interaction, and rearrangement of the room.

An Authentic Experience Emerges

In our comfortable classroom atmosphere, using the environment as “the third educator” (Gandini, 1998, p. 177), participants openly commented on a wide range of experiences and topics. We overheard them complaining about the inconvenience created by construction adjacent to our building — noise from the large machines, lack of parking, dust and dirt everywhere. We considered how participants’ complaints about the construction might be reframed to develop their teaching practice.

Here was an authentic, shared experience offering some interesting possibilities for project work while illustrating the principle of the environment as a third teacher. Our key question emerged: How could we use the construction site as a provocation (Edwards, 1998) to inspire learning and build teaching capacity through inquiry?

As part of the underlying structure of the courses, we grouped participants for various activities, usually one postgraduate with four undergraduates. As the construction site project emerged, we collectively identified the roles post-
graduates would play in the group process. These roles included observing, recording, engaging the group in conversation, and ultimately assisting the undergraduates to document their learning. The postgraduates themselves also reflected on their personal learning, in essence, functioning as pedagogistas who, in the schools in Reggio Emilia, support the teachers and staff, interpret the philosophy, and act as consultants and mediators as necessary (Fraser, 2006).

Class group members decided that a field trip to the construction site closest to the Education Building would be the catalyst for further inquiry and documentation. Members of small groups talked about their frustrations, questions, and ideas about the visit to the construction site. They recorded their questions, established group member roles, and obtained the materials needed for the excursion. The day of the field trip arrived rainy and gray. Despite the weather, group members, equipped with umbrellas, went outdoors to observe, interview workers, take photos, sketch, write, and talk with each other. After 90 min, participants returned to debrief as a large group and to begin their group collaboration about representing their construction site experience.

The following day, we began a dialogue with a conversation starter. The prompt, “Consideration of multiple perspectives will contribute to documentation’s ultimate power to communicate” (Fyfe, 1998, p. 20), was selected specifically to engage participants in reflection of their previous day’s experience. During discussion it became obvious that participants interpreted their experiences at the construction site differently and we encouraged them to consider each others’ differing perspectives. These conversations were essential in creating a heightened sense of group identity. Participants’ relationships changed as they commented on the strengths each individual brought to the process. They observed that authentic learning can occur in a variety of places. One individual stressed the following:

The “place-based” educational experience allowed for greater stimulation of all our learning senses. By experiencing a balance of group and individual work BOTH in and out of the classroom setting, our personal knowledge acquisition tools were stimulated in a variety of ways, thus making the learning more meaningful.

These conversations offered both the undergraduates and postgraduates powerful evidence of what they learned through continuous dialogue, personal experience, and recording of their discoveries. Tensions we had observed earlier between postgraduates and undergraduates dissolved as participants began to see themselves as colearners rather than as individuals separated by the power of experience and age.

The groups then focused on how they would represent their experiences. They planned what they wanted to emphasize, and how to communicate their learning process to the rest of the class. Participants reviewed past readings to identify relevant theoretical concepts to support the big ideas (Wassermann, 2000) they wanted to convey, selected quotes from the construction workers’ interviews, and sorted through photos and sketches. The previous discussions about the meaning of the experiences at the site contributed to the authentic quality of the project’s documentation.

Learners constructed documentation panels using large sheets of poster paper or corrugated board, with artifacts chosen from text, photos, sketches, and sometimes three-dimensional objects, arranged aesthetically. The resulting documentation panels represented—through words, images, and objects—the notion of “the hundred languages of children” (Malaguzzi, 1998b, p. 3). One of the participants observed the following:

The process reinforced, for me, no matter what age you’re at or what stage you’re at, we’re all capable of making new connections. We discover through those connections, and learning along with others, that the opportunity for reflection changes your viewpoints. You learn to look at the world in a different way. You learn to take everything as having value.

Prior to this working session, we had shown videos about documentation, had shared our documentation representing our visit to Reggio Emilia, and participants had read articles and chapters (Fraser, 2000; Gandini & Goldhaber, 2001; Hong
& Forman, 2000) focused on the processes involved in documentation. This background offered participants information about the theory and rationale for using documentation in early childhood settings, elements to include in a panel, and criteria for assessing the effectiveness of documentation.

Everyone was invited to walk through the display of documentation panels, becoming aware of their impressions, interpretations, and responses to the panels which their peers had created. The room was abuzz with anticipation as participants listened for the various meanings their peers ascribed to the common experience (Forman & Fyfe, 1998). We heard delighted exclamations as individuals examined each documentation panel and acknowledged the creativity and thoughtfulness illustrated by each group.

After the viewing, we convened a large group discussion of how learning had been made visible (Gardiner, 2001). It became evident in the dialogue that the panels were not the only important outcome of this project. The processes of conversing about important concepts, deciding how to depict learning, and using collaborative skills to negotiate on ways to proceed, were equally significant to participants. One of our goals was to challenge participants to think about how the documentation process could be used in their own practice. One individual stated the following:

Documentation did help me to formulate questions and take them back to my own teaching environment and see how I could use them. The documentation of the project helped us to revisit what we were learning, what we were doing and later, gave us a chance to see where we were going with the project. It helped reshape my thinking about how powerful documentation is, how many people it can reach, and its many purposes.

**Reflections on Reflection**

At the conclusion of these small group projects, we asked ourselves how effective this investigation had been in answering the question we had generated at the outset of the courses. Was the construction site as provocative as we had imagined in supporting collaborative, connected, and critical integration? Were learners now more able to recognize opportunities for exploration and documentation with young children? To gather participants’ views that would expand our thinking about these questions, we decided to invite the four postgraduate students to discuss their experiences following the conclusion of the summer session. After obtaining ethics approval and interviewing each student, we carefully considered their responses. Their comments, which we have used throughout this article, revealed how they viewed the class processes and influenced our reflections on what occurred during and after the summer courses.

In retrospect, this brief but intense experience transformed participants’ views of themselves as learners. One member of the group noted the following: “Whether we realize it or not, the decisions we make, be they consciously or subconsciously, are based upon our experiences, so the greater the meaning we can put into those experiences, the greater the long term benefits.” As learners became more able to question what they had taken for granted in their practice, they invested their work with more value and meaning. Rinaldi (2005) brought similar intentions to working with individuals learning to be teachers:

What I try to do with the students is to help them to encounter their own image of the child, to reflect on it, to understand the implications for education of the image of the child they have—in terms of values, strategies, the quality of the relationship with the children and so on. What is also absolutely important is to support them to discover the connection between theory and practice, and to give them the feeling, the emotional feeling, that their place—their metaphorical place—is the connection, the meeting place between theory and practice. I think here is the meaning of teaching. (p. 194)

The construction site project built teaching capacity in a number of ways:

- Instructors modeled building on learners’ interests to embark on a project.
Participants took charge of their own learning with support from everyone in the class. Participants engaged in multifaceted conversations as they documented their learning. Participants collaborated on a meaningful project.

In reflecting on similar work with learners, van Schalkwyk (2006) noted the following: “In the process of co-constructing knowledge, an alternative space for teaching and learning evolves, and students develop a critical awareness and psychological thinking based on their own ‘expert knowledge,’ moving from passive learning to negotiating alternative positions” (para. 3).

In our reflections on reflections about teaching and learning, we identified several outcomes directly related to the effectiveness of the model as well as to the experiences of others (Fraser, 2000; Haigh, 2004; Miller & Shoptaugh, 2004). Through establishing an environment that supported conversation, collaboration, and documentation, learners

- Developed a new discourse that allowed them to describe their projects and ideas in meaningful ways.
- Expanded individual perspectives through reflecting on one’s own interpretations in the context of others’ views.
- Worked together to negotiate perspectives, to compromise, and thereby to create new viewpoints supporting collaborative learning.
- Used conversation to make decisions which resulted in powerful documentation of inquiry.
- Experienced rich and authentic learning opportunities.

Over the 4 weeks, a learning group (Krechevsky & Mardell, 2001; Project Zero, 2004) was formed in our classroom—not as a result of instructor planning or strategizing, but as a result of practicing the principles of Reggio Emilia.

As we considered the factors that support the creation and nurturance of learning groups, we encountered the work of Ceppi and Zini (1998/2001), who introduced and defined the concept of relational space:

A relational space is an environmental fabric rich in information, without formal rules … a whole made up of many different identities, with a recognizable feel about it, in harmony with a set of values and references that guide each choice and line of research.

In their suggestion that relational space is marked by an absence of formal rules, an environment in which views can be discussed in a playful, “to and fro” manner, they echoed the work of Gadamer (1975). This exchange of ideas opens the learner to alternative interpretations and opportunities for collaboration. Participants revise and re-interpret their understandings through the dialogue. Everyone’s thinking changed as a result of the experiences provoked by the construction site project. (p. 12)

**Conclusion**

As our understanding of Reggio principles grew, we changed our classroom roles from being conductors to becoming responsive inquirers. We struggled to learn to trust these new roles, and to become comfortable as co-learners and co-teachers. Giving up power and control was much more difficult than we had imagined. It proved to be more important to learners’ growth than we had initially thought (Abramson & Atwal, 2004; Miller & Shoptaugh, 2004). Britzman and Pitt (1996) pointed out that, “learning something from an engagement is of a different order than learning something about it” (p. 119). Participants learned something about the principles of Reggio Emilia through the construction site inquiry, and we all learned more from experiencing conversation, collaboration, and documentation in our practice.

We recognized that class conversations and experiences carried a certain opportunity for all to consider a range of possibilities for teacher practice (New, 2005). As Munby and Russell (1994) described the influence of the practical, the “authority in experience” encouraged each of us, participants and instructors, to become aware of our
personal and professional development and the importance of constructing knowledge through practice. In other words, together, all of us were “learning to learn.”

“The transformation is a transformation into the true. What emerges [is]…what otherwise is constantly hidden and withdrawn” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 101). The construction site project represents such a transformative process, uncovering new understandings of the power of conversation, collaboration, and documentation for all of the participants.

References


