
Teachers and students as co-learners: possibilities and problems

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Introduction

Learning is about building relationships with people – children and adults – and creating connections between ideas and the environment; not separating or isolating subjects, skills or people.

The Reggio Emilia approach claims to be influenced by Vygotsky in asserting that ‘children’s participation in communicative processes is the foundation, on which they build their understanding’ (Cadwell 1997, p 62). I began recording children’s dialogue in my class after a visit to Reggio Emilia in Italy, observing the students’ problem-solving skills as they interacted with their project work. I noted that the children themselves contributed guidelines to help define the emerging curriculum.

I was fortunate enough to travel to Reggio Emilia, Italy, with a study tour of the preschools in this small city. I was drawn there by my interest in the hugely expressive individual and group project work they support in their beautiful schools. It has been exciting to witness the process and learn how to support it without dictating its direction. Starting from a place of ...trust in children, I have been led by them into these amazing projects. (Daws – personal journal, May 2000)

Dialogue between children is a key variable in co-constructivism. From my interviews and observations, I noticed that there was a greater potential for children to gain personal and cognitive meaning from their dialogue if a secure environment was established to enable them to take risks – effected through the encouragement of collaborative groups, small discussion sessions and tribes. Children were more likely to express an authentic voice when their individual responses and interpretations were valued by the teacher and their fellow students, and scaffolded through questioning at various levels. At least one interviewee indicated that there should be more questioning that encourages students to apply the narratives they study to their own personal journeys.

Changing genre was something I do often and I thought that was really a way to get them to think about it. ... But ... I would make it more their personal journey. I would do more with getting them to identify with a character and choose a setting and a

conflict that maybe they can identify with metaphorically ... This is what I didn't do enough of. That is what I'm starting to do in working with children. (Daws – personal journal, October 2001)

The curriculum is characterised by many features advocated by contemporary research on young children, including real-life problem-solving among peers, with numerous opportunities for creative thinking and exploration. Teachers often work on projects with small groups of children, while the rest of the class engages in a wide variety of self-selected activities typical of preschool classrooms.

Documentation is a key part of the central core of the Reggio Emilia methodology. Teachers record and document each project that children complete, using photographs, recorded dialogue, drawings, and notes on their behaviour and interactions. Teachers share these with colleagues and parents.

Teachers have the responsibility of guiding children through their learning process and extending and enhancing the curriculum for each student's progress toward social and cognitive development. To form a sincere relationship with each child and understand her/his specific needs, teachers must listen to students. The teachers ultimately become the researchers and develop professionally by revisiting and reflecting on classroom experiences when creating documentation. To truly benefit from the reciprocal learning process, it is important for teachers to consider themselves active learners as well.

Teachers can use documentation in many concrete ways to facilitate the communication of classroom events and activities, announcements, observations, reflections, project work, and the individual development of each child. Documentation can be used through tape and video recordings, newsletters, email and websites (with technological progress in the classroom), student portfolios, project and theme books, and parent/teacher conferences. Teachers can even simply take notes on observations and reflect on events.

Reggio Emilia's approach to early education reflects a theoretical kinship with primary educators Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky and Bruner, among others. Much of what occurs in the class reflects a co-constructivist approach to early and primary education.

To balance my views, I also acknowledge the influence of the work of Grieshaber and Amos Hatch (2003), who discuss pedagogical documentation as an effect of globalisation. They state:

Against the backdrop of neoliberal education agendas, the Reggio Emilia approach has grown over many years in a community in northern Italy valuing a particular approach to children and their education. This has been transported in various ways throughout the globe, perhaps not with the aim of direct replication, but certainly with the aim of using the techniques and approaches that work so effectively in the Reggio Emilia schools. (p 134)

They conclude that Australian educators need to adopt a more critical analysis of documentation and be careful about notions of surveillance and observation.

The Reggio Emilia approach, and its social constructivist origins, are of specific interest here because, within this frame of thought, educators can use documentation to explain children's processes of learning; collecting, interpreting and displaying children's understandings of their world using multiple modes of expression. Rinaldi (1996) defines documentation as

a point of strength that makes timely and visible the interweaving of actions of the adults and of the children; it improves the quality of communication and interaction. It is in fact a process of reciprocal learning. Documentation makes it possible for teachers to sustain the children's learning while they also learn (to teach) from the children's own learning.

Educators view children as active learners, and purposefully place them in relation to others to allow them opportunities for social interaction. The relationships they form with other protagonists aides them to construct knowledge as well as self-identity. Through the process of documentation, students are given the opportunity to revisit, reflect and interpret their learning experiences. Through this process, children not only learn to become better listeners, but feel empowered by knowing that their work is taken seriously and their interests are considered important to curriculum development.

In her book *Bringing learning to life: a Reggio approach to early childhood education*, Louise Cadwell reflects on the impressions and experiences of the Reggio Emilia approach gained by a number of early childhood educators following a study visit to the region. Offering a variety of perspectives, the book is focused on key issues such as staffing, training, working with parents, play, learning, the culture of early childhood, and special educational needs. It provides a welcome challenge to thinking for practitioners and policy makers. Cadwell acknowledges the potential of children, organisations and the quality of environments created, the promotion of collegiality and the climate of co-participation of families in the educational setting.

A great deal of research and discussion has centred on the early childhood aspects of the Reggio Emilia methodology. One advantage of this approach, based upon widespread shared cultural values, is that the responsibility for young children is essentially being shared. Other advantages include promoting connections in and outside preschool environments, collaborative exploration, and substantial documentation of children's learning and development. On the negative side, for countries like Australia, there are issues related to outcomes-based education, staffing levels, and timetable constrictions.

I have analysed my reflective-narrative journal by:

- reflecting, reviewing and synthesising my practice in implementing Reggio Emilia in an upper primary context;

- analysing the extent to which the principles underpinning Reggio Emilia emerged in my reflections on my classroom practice; and
- sharing personal reflections and insights with the Early Learning Centre Coordinator (Reggio Emilia practitioner) to gain feedback, insights and reflections of my own account of Reggio Emilia.

The cross-referencing assisted me in the validation process, and I selected excerpts from my journal based on the above criteria and the frequency of common recorded elements. In my journal, I also recorded dialogue with other professionals and incorporated these into my reflections and analysis, and validated my cross-referencing.

I documented the experiences in my journal that seemed particularly significant instances where I had new insights and lived experiences as a teacher. The journal was an opportunity to story and filter these professional experiences.

School context

My school is a co-educational, non-denominational private school of approximately 1500 students. It comprises three campuses: a Junior School (Early Learning Centre to year 6); a Middle School (years 7–10); and a Senior School (years 11–12). The Junior School, where I teach, has approximately 400 students. There is a heavy extra-curricular program, with a large variety of sport offered throughout the year. It is compulsory for students to wear a school uniform. My classroom contains 25 year 6 students between 11 and 12 years of age, with a balance of girls and boys.

My timetable allows for some flexibility, with allocation for specialists in the areas of Chinese, Drama, Art, Physical Education, Computing, Social Skills, Library, Special Education and Music. A gifted and talented program also complements classroom units of inquiry. The curriculum allows for students to undertake project work through units of inquiry that are part of the International Baccalaureate Primary Years Program.

The program endeavours to develop the individual talents of young people and teach them to relate the experience of the classroom to the realities of the world outside. Strong emphasis is placed on the ideals of international understanding and responsible citizenship, to the end that students become critical and compassionate thinkers, lifelong learners and informed participants in local and world affairs, conscious of the shared humanity that binds all people together while respecting the variety of cultures and attitudes that makes for the richness of life. (International Baccalaureate Organisation 2000 – Making the PYP happen)

My classroom is regular in shape, with desks grouped in work teams. The central carpeted area is free of furniture, allowing space for whole-class debates, presentations and general discussions. There is a bank of eight computers on one side of the room, with internet and intranet access for student projects. There are displays of student interest profiles on the walls, and various showcases of student assignment work. My desk faces a wall by the front door. I rarely sit at my desk, because I am always moving around the room to sit, observe and talk to my

students. The curriculum complements the Reggio Emilia methodology and fosters its core elements.

Implementing the Reggio Emilia approach

As an upper primary classroom teacher, I struggled with my own need for social and academic reference points that were appropriate for the diverse population of children in my care. Ultimately, the children and I co-constructed two rules to negotiate countless decisions that we faced during our time together: (1) make this room a nice place to be for everyone; and (2) have something challenging to do every day.

Further, these rules almost encapsulate the essence of my vision of a curriculum worthy of negotiating with children. On what bases, however, did I make these negotiated agreements with the children in my classroom? What's 'challenging' for an 11-year-old? What's 'challenging' and also important enough to foster within the school environment?

Clearly, although I gave significant credence to the children's understandings of their own social and emotional needs, educational aims and interests, I also drew upon my own professional training and values. As I reflect now on these teaching experiences, I find some degree of satisfaction in having emphasised the children's social relations and respected their ideas as well as their imagined potentials. And yet, although I would not have imagined such a need at the time, I now understand that something else was necessary in these negotiations: co-construction with children's families, other teachers and community members.

Relationships

Any work combining visual and textual representations that depict children's learning and teach adults about children will be of continuing interest to educators in early childhood and upper primary classrooms.

Children know "... what the adults care about, what they think is interesting, worth doing, worth doing over again, worth taking time to plan and prepare for. The children realize what the adults take pains to explain, take pictures of, make notes about, write down, transcribe from tape recording, etc. The children have some level of awareness of what the teachers talk about to each other, to their parents, to interested visitors, and therefore the children consider their work worthy of effort and attention." (Katz 1990, p 12)

Documentation

Documentation serves:

- as a method of communication between parents and teachers;
- as a means of documenting a child's progress relative to other children;
- as evidence to the child of the importance attributed to a certain life period (New 1990, p 5);

- as a means of validating a child's self esteem;
- to capture the interest of other children (New 1990, p 8); and
- to provide opportunities to enhance memory as a means of allowing each teacher to become a producer of research; someone who generates new ideas about curriculum and learning, rather than merely being a 'consumer of uncertainty and tradition' (Edwards 1993, p 157).

To me, this practice is the 'ideal'. In documenting, I look at multiple strategies for engaging myself in conversations about children's learning and how educators can support children's school goals – this is co-constructive community-building. Documentation is a particularly powerful strategy for contributing to home school relations and teacher development. I use photos, transcripts and exemplars not only as a way of communicating with parents, but as a mediating tool; a vehicle for teachers to undertake sustained study of children's learning. Like many other teachers of early childhood and upper primary students, I document this way using Learning Journey logs and Portfolios.

The portfolio reflects a co-constructed document of work with an equal number of pieces that are chosen by the children and by me that as a whole reflect their authentic learning journey. (Daws – personal journal, August 2001)

In documenting their work, teachers can sow the seeds of collaboration and critical thinking among all partners in children's education. By engaging in conversations with other teachers, experts or parents, educators consider multiple points of view. Documentation allows all of those involved to revisit experiences – individually and collectively. It is important to note, however, that taking a critical perspective does not entail that educators are trying to find something negative to say – just that they are trying to see something from multiple points of view.

Over the course of my experiences I assess student learning in many ways. I have kept running records, performed qualitative reading inventories, and developed student portfolios. These strategies of assessment help students reflect on and extend and experience, learn how to look at problems, decide how they might tackle them, investigate collaboratively, and communicate their findings. While it is important to document the assessment of the students, it is equally important to communicate these findings with parents. (Daws – personal journal, August 2001)

We live in a time of rapid change, and schools are under pressure to accommodate it. Providing good schooling requires continual efforts to improve. Real change is difficult to enact, however. This is the challenge: effecting real change, not just the appearance of change. I am always trying to make children's learning journeys authentic by encouraging the co-construction of curricula.

Projects

Much of the upper primary curriculum has been divided into projects (units of inquiry) based on the Primary Years International Baccalaureate Program. The individual units of inquiry are in fact projects designed by students. The children

devise the questions they want to investigate, and work out a plan to consider all learning aspects of those questions as they relate to the core units of study.

The practical limitations concerning the curriculum guidelines for upper primary can be overcome by developing themed units focusing on the key elements of the Reggio philosophy, where students initiate questions and tasks; and using documentation, display and evaluative procedures.

To get beyond appearances, educators must have a strong sense of what they do well, what they do reasonably well, and what they don't do so well. And they must understand why they do what they do. For upper primary and early childhood teachers alike, this takes time, thoughtfulness and honest humility. The Reggio Emilia methodology offers insight into the child. I believe that upper primary teachers can learn a great deal from it.

For me, co-inquiry and co-learning have become actualised synonymous terms. A self-fulfilling prophesy? Perhaps. When I first conceived of this project, I wanted to explore the ways in which these notions are interconnected. Some of the underpinnings of co-learning are based on the findings of a variety of research studies and the inclusion of elements that I believe foster a mind-set of research/inquiry. I view the meanings made between co-inquirers as valid and enlightening, and co-inquiry as an activity within co-learning. I do not necessarily see co-learning as an activity within co-inquiry unless the world view of the inquiry is one of 'in-relationship' and 'in-inter-subjectivity'. I also think that if an educator takes on the practice of co-learning but does not simultaneously engage in a semi-formal action research project, at the very least, his/her practice of co-learning will be limited. This is because the process depends on the reactions of the co-participants to sustain its movement.

Can co-learning and co-research be considered enterprises – 'a pedagogy', as described by Lusted? This is difficult to determine. Lusted's parameters for pedagogy include addressing 'the transformation of consciousness that takes place in the intersection of three agencies – the teacher, the learner and the knowledge that they together produce' (1986, p 3). Considering the information I received from the students, I cannot ascertain whether they would acknowledge that they experienced a transformation of consciousness through their encounters with the teacher (myself) and the knowledge we produced together. I can only say that my conscious awareness has been transformed through these processes. I was, of course, looking for this change.

These considerations aside, I think that implementing a mind-set of co-research into the everyday classroom is a wonderful tool for increasing the potential of all learners for self-awareness and self-responsibility. It also appears to increase the potential for educators to develop curriculum materials within the learning community. The practice of co-research is a tool that has the potential to eliminate the dichotomy between theory and practice. By practising a pedagogy of co-research, practitioners can begin to investigate their theoretical intuitions with their co-researchers, through challenging such intuitions in their practical environments.

The mind-set of co-researching with students also allows teachers the freedom to take up the intuitions of any of the co-researchers and investigate these within the practical context of the classroom.

We are only limited by our imaginations and risk-taking capabilities. Although the school timetable and the children's maturity and energy levels play a part, the essence of the Reggio philosophy can remain intact in the upper primary classroom.

I believe that successful use of the educational practices of the Reggio Emilia approach, including observation and documentation can be achieved with older children. Using portfolios and student conferences, teachers can plant the seeds for a co-constructed project whereby students have control over the documentation, along with the teacher, ensuring mutual recording and acknowledgement of all aspects of their learning.

Co-learning

The conditions of the process of co-learning are not only a manifestation in my own mind, but in the minds of some of my students/participants. Co-learning is a never-ending process, influenced by the checks and balances enacted by all of the participants. In my own work, I learned that a practice of co-learning can become apparent and be made viable through the goodwill of the participants. I was able to trust the conception of co-learning, because what I had learned through listening to and observing participants were transferable considerations.

Each year, participants still value the same basic things: respect; compassion; opportunities to discuss issues and learn about things they had not previously thought about; being listened to; a feeling of family and community; opportunities to create a unique learning environment based on the needs of all the participants; humour; and comfort in a process that allows them to recognise their own abilities. They value demonstrations of trust in their abilities and actions, support (non-interference in their ability to act on their goals and aspirations) – and help to actualise these.

Being realistic about my goals and recognising the value of supporting each other and doing it in an environment that has open communication, trust, empowerment, satisfaction, tolerance and good humour is enabling me to design projects that the students refine and manage themselves. (Daws – personal journal, May 2000)

In light of recent feedback from the potential co-learners of today, and from the coordinator of the school's Early Learning Centre (a colleague who read a draft of this document and offered a validation of the relationships and practices in my classroom), I would like to further develop this concept as an important step in the research process: continuing reflective input as a part of the checks and balances of an ever-developing pedagogy.

What I learned: feedback

I obtained constructive feedback on my practice of the Reggio Emilia approach in my upper primary classroom from discussions, active debate and a class buddy interactive programme with the Early Learning Centre Coordinator. From the beginning, the Coordinator gave honest opinions on the success of the methodology as she observed my interactions with children and use of themed units initiated by the children. Based on her observations, she felt that I had successfully incorporated a number of Reggio attributes in my classroom, in:

- *promoting the image of the child* – acknowledging all children as capable, having potential, and able to construct their own learning;
- *emphasising the environment and beauty* – ensuring the classroom was aesthetically a beautiful place;
- *not strictly following the clock* – showing respect for children's pace of learning, and keeping a flexible timetable and stable and constant child-teacher relationships;
- *using emergent (child-centred) curricula/projects* – encouraging children to follow their interests, revisiting topics again and again to add new insights;
- *creating a stimulating environment* – encouraging activity, involvement and discovery, using a variety of media; and
- *using documentation* – observing, recording, thinking and sharing children's learning with parents, colleagues and fellow classmates.

She also expressed some of the main concerns regarding the constraints on applying the Reggio Emilia methodology in my upper primary classroom. First, it was not possible to spend a whole day on a child-centred project due to the inclusion of specialist lessons such as physical education, art, drama and library. There were, however some teaching team days, where all staff were involved with the class on the same theme. Second, the upper primary children often needed a lot of individual teacher assistance with their projects, and it was difficult getting around to see everyone and give them all equitable time. The Early Learning Centre had two staff for 20 students.

Implementing the Reggio Emilia approach in the upper primary classroom

The key components required to foster the approach are creative teaching and creative teachers. I agree with Craft (2000), Edwards and Springate (1995), and Mellou (1994), who highlight the role of the teacher in providing the optimum balance between structure and freedom of expression for young children. In my practice, I have tried to encourage creativity through my own behaviours, such as asking open-ended questions, tolerating ambiguity, modelling creative thinking and behaviour, encouraging experimentation and persistence, and praising children who

provide unexpected answers. All of these are aspects of the Reggio Emilia philosophy.

Malaguzzi (1993) makes a number of observations about the optimum conditions for developing creativity in children, including an emphasis on interaction with adults and peers.

The most favourable situation for creativity seems to be interpersonal exchange, with negotiation of conflicts and comparison of ideas and actions being the decisive elements. (Malaguzzi 1993)

The following points relate to my exploration of Reggio Emilia early childhood practice in an upper primary classroom.

1. Children construct their own understanding of concepts, and they benefit from instruction by more competent peers and adults. My journey in the classroom validated this when the children constantly drew on each other for inspiration, guidance and help.

Today I observed how group work teams consolidate learning, where there is a leader, recorder, reporter and material manager operating together on an open ended task, and they support each other in finding solutions that can work. This also exists in early childhood classes using the Reggio approach where children work on projects together in teams with the assistance of teachers. (Daws – personal journal, October 2002)

2. Children benefit from opportunities to see connections across disciplines through integration of the curriculum and from opportunities to engage in in-depth study within a content area. Reggio Emilia early childhood classrooms have been doing this in developing projects with the input of children, and confirming with them where and how far they want to investigate a particular theme or idea.

I have never been so impressed with my year 6 students over the last two weeks when they each investigated their own project associated with water care, incorporating integrated ideas on the care of the environment, social justice issues, urban planning and thoughts on the future. They were so engaged with their own work, but at the same time interested in what each other were doing while making learning connections. (Daws – personal journal, May 2002)

3. Children benefit from predictable structure and orderly routine in the learning environment, and from the teacher's flexibility and spontaneity in responding to their emerging ideas, needs and interests. The saying 'you cannot have freedom without responsibility' rings true in any classroom organised using the Reggio Emilia philosophy. Having routines and responsibilities around the way learning occurs in the classroom provides a framework for establishing a classroom where children feel safe to investigate under the umbrella of associated rights and responsibilities.

The activities I completed with the class today on Flight reinforced my classroom set up and rules. I feel I have created stimulating learning centres encompassing gender equity and social justice. Rosters for use of the computers, writing centre, construction centre, reading-research centre and the proof reading centre have catered for varying learning styles and can be adapted to suit many teaching methods. I can see that my classroom clearly is set up and maintained as an equitable structure and provides access to all resources by all students. (Daws – personal journal, August 2001)

4. Children benefit from opportunities to make meaningful choices about what they will do and learn and from having a clear understanding of the boundaries within which choices are permissible.

Every child has been considered in the design of my classroom. They consequently have enabled the classroom to be a place of serenity and where they enjoy learning and I enjoy teaching. Each child has an important role to play in my room as they do in the Reggio Early Childhood classroom. (Daws – personal journal, April 2001)

5. Children benefit from situations that challenge them to work at the edge of their developing capacities and from ample opportunities to practice newly acquired skills and to acquire the disposition to persist.

Children will express themselves more freely if they do not feel the threat of a judge's sentence. My father knew all my faults, but to hear him talk in my presence you would think I had few equals. He showed me in a hundred ways that he approved of me. Risk takers I believe develop from this constant reinforcement and promotion of individual support and care for the individual. Children work harder at their work and relationships as a consequence. (Daws – personal journal, May 2001)

6. Children benefit from opportunities to collaborate with their peers and acquire a sense of being part of a community and from being treated as individuals with their own strengths, interests and needs.

The values that I try to instil in my children stem from the way Reggio Emilia promotes community. Through open-ended collaborative projects the values of honesty, respect for self and others, adaptability, willingness to participate, risking taking, respect for self and property, effective communication, social conscience, lifelong learning and pursuit of personal excellence continues to endure. (Daws – personal journal, December 2001)

7. Children need to develop a positive sense of their own self-identity and respect for other people whose perspectives and experiences may be different from their own.

The unit of inquiry about advertising persuaders we are working on reinforces how advertisers affect our values and well-being. The class have learnt through collaborative project how messages are conveyed not only through advertising but also through their own interactions with each other. Valuing each other's differences has taught them to convey positive and honest messages to each other by acting as a creative team and

carefully researching patterns they notice that are conveyed to them by individuals and companies. (Daws – personal journal, June 2001)

8. Children have enormous capacities to learn and an almost boundless curiosity about the world; and they have recognised, age-related limits on their cognitive and linguistic capacities.

Reggio teachers are trained on the job to express general goals and make hypotheses about what direction activities and projects might take. I have observed that when you do this with upper primary children they become very active in the planning, integration and adaptation as the curriculum emerges. Discussion usually starts a new investigation or problem where many questions are generated, and research often includes excursions that are child planned, implemented and presented. The process repeats itself continuously and is recorded through various forms of documentation. (Daws – personal journal, Sept 2001)

Methodology: narrative journal analysis

Through this research process, I found that, while I was not actively working with reference to all of the above categories and features in the same moment, they were always with me and I could draw upon them whenever they seemed appropriate to the situation (Schon 1983). I learned this from observing my behaviour not only in action, but through making journal entries, listening to the tapes of class encounters and engaging in various discussions with past and present learners. The action of analysis, while seeming laborious and almost pedantic, is perhaps essential to implementing a practice of choice. For me, action leads to synthesis, because I try to implement the analysis into my practice. I am convinced that without all the theory, analysis and synthesis I would be unable, in the moment-to-moment activity of the classroom, to call upon all of the considerations I have identified as essential to the practice of co-learning.

Action research is a hall of mirrors – a ‘conceptual web’ (Greene 1988). At each moment of thinking about, acting within and describing the research process, the researcher has to be mindful of her/himself and the co-researchers. This is a challenge to the notion of ‘in-relationship’: trying to conceptualise from two sides of the same coin in the same moment. It is also a discipline that continues to inform my practice. It was and is difficult to live; it demands a constant mindfulness (Drake & Miller 1991). At every step of my work, I was mindful of my intentions, values, and philosophy.

Luckily for me, I wanted what I achieved. In fact, I achieved even more; I now have greater clarity about the practice of co-learning. I recognise that my interest in developing a relational practice that takes care of the people within the process is a transferable interest; the participants took care of each other. I have come to better understand how differing views – perhaps philosophical stances, regarding control over information and knowledge – produce conflicts so profound that they are almost impossible to discuss. Perhaps these philosophical stances cannot be discussed because they are two worldviews on a collision course. I believe action research is an important practice for educators; because if we do not analyse

our intentions, philosophies and values, and make judgements that we can live with these visions (Dewey 1916) – then we could get something we do not want.

Teachers have the opportunity to express their research in multiple ways. I plan by documenting the experiences within my classroom, first by making observations and reflections, and later analysing and interpreting the actions to make provocations that will further extend the curriculum. This research can then be made tangible through theme books, teacher portfolios, documentation panels, and with the progression of technology – even a web site. Because of this work I have the opportunity to reflect on and evaluate the processes and understanding of child development. This state of self re-framing contributes to a constant evolution of professional development as an educator. (Daws – personal journal, September 2000)

Conclusion

Our goal is to create an amiable school, where children, teachers, and families feel at home. Such a school requires careful thinking and planning concerning procedures, motivations, and interests. It must embody ways of getting along together, of intensifying relationships among the three central protagonists, of assuring complete attention to the problems of education, and of activating participation and research. (Malaguzzi 1993, pp 64–65)

As I prepared for this research project, specifically participating within an action research mode of operation, I was becoming more reflective about and more observant of my everyday practice. I devised a tentative framework acknowledging some of what I had observed, combined it with what I had heard from learners, and flavoured it with what I had read and discussed with colleagues.

Using Lather's (1991) writings about poststructuralist research principles and methodology, I consider this tentative framework a theory. Like all theories, however, it can be tested and changed. I am not attached to any one idea and, throughout my future teaching/learning experiences, I anticipate continuing to develop the ways in which I play these ideas out.

From writing my journal, I also have a better feel for the value of a constructionist approach, as well as the value of a reflective account for qualitative assessment of learning. (Daws – personal journal, May 2001)

Viewed in this way, teaching becomes the establishment and maintenance of a language and a means of communication between the teacher and students, as well as between students. Simply presenting material, giving out problems, and accepting answers back is not a refined enough process of communication for children to learn efficiently.

A constructivist perspective views learners as actively engaged in making meaning. Teachers working from this approach look for what students can analyse, investigate, collaborate, share, build and generate based on what they already know – rather than what facts, skills and processes they can parrot. To do this effectively, teachers need to be learners and researchers; and to strive for greater awareness of the environments and participants in a given teaching situation, in order to continually adjust their actions to engage students in learning.

Despite the very fluid nature of co-constructivism and its many faces, I now believe that attempting to understand it while simultaneously applying such understanding in a reflective manner promotes the development of influential mental constructs that are useful in the pursuit of more effective communication, teaching and learning.

I am trying not to underestimate my power as an educator: my power to make all of my students feel included, and perhaps, most importantly, my power to plant hope. (Daws – personal journal, June 2001)

Teaching practices that are culturally relevant and well grounded in research on human development and the brain are a pervasive force in our educational system. Yet the tension between the views of education as a means of nurturing a child's intelligence and curiosity – and education as a means of transmitting the knowledge, skills, and social and moral rules of a culture – often creates an environment that makes their implementation problematic.

Teachers may feel caught between emphasising skills and meaning; between covering the curriculum and 'the having of wonderful ideas'; and between raising standardised test scores and nurturing multiple intelligences. As Apple (1992, p 4) has argued, school curriculum is not neutral knowledge. 'Rather, what counts as legitimate knowledge is the result of complex power relations and struggles among identifiable class, race, gender, and religious groups'. In short, schooling takes place in a wider political context; one in which there is currently a great deal of anxiety and controversy regarding the nature of schooling, the economy and society itself.

The principles of developmentally appropriate practices – creating meaningful learning experiences that enhance the development of multiple intelligences and perspectives and a 'sense of wonder'; establishing family/school/community partnerships based on mutual respect; and creating a caring, culturally diverse, democratic learning community – have roots in good early childhood practice. But it is clear that the principles are not just for young children; they are principles to live by, and can flow through to the upper primary years of schooling.

I believe wonder and curiosity are integral to motivation, engagement, and interest during later school years through adulthood. It is highly relevant that I continue to recognize, appreciate, and foster young children's expressions of wonder. What happens in primary schools to cause wonder and curiosity to disappear in the school setting? Pedagogical practice fostering wonder and curiosity in young students should be continually viewed and analysed. (Daws – personal journal, May 2001)

Through my experiences I have come to realise that, as teachers, we must view children as strong and capable learners. We must be willing to acknowledge a child's potential and in turn create a community that fosters the many languages of children. We must encourage positive relationships between each of the three protagonists. We must be flexible as curriculum planners and researchers, and we must provide an environment that is conducive to learning, in order to be effective. We must do 'Nothing without joy'.

My hope as a teacher is to relate these strategies for educational practice to basic child development and every child's individual needs. By conceptualising the broad implications of my objectives and creating a balance between the scientific data and social application, I will best be able to assess my philosophy when I put it to use. My goal for my own community of learners is for each student to feel accepted by their peers and an integral part of the whole. To me, teaching is an act of love.

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