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Reggio Emilia as a metaphorical homeland: an account of professional 'becoming'

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Abstract
An invitation in the August 2014 edition of 'The Challenge' to reflect on how the Reggio Emilia educational project has influenced me professionally and personally immediately provoked memories from throughout my teaching career. Encounters with the ideas underpinning pedagogy in Reggio Emilia have repeatedly reignited my passion as an early childhood teacher and have provoked me to advocacy, debate, research in practice, leadership and now doctoral studies and university teaching. Much of the credit I give to the project in Reggio Emilia for my ongoing growth as an educator has been documented in previous editions of 'The Challenge' (Lindsay 2008a, 2008b, 2008c, 2008d, 2009, 2012). However, 'who I am' is constantly changing and I continue to transform and to 'become' (Lindsay 2012). Consequently, this iteration of my story of 'becoming' seeks to further examine several elements of the Reggio Emilia project that have provoked and inspired reflection, practice and professional transformation.

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Reggio Emilia as a Metaphorical Homeland: An account of professional ‘becoming’.

Author Biography:
Currently completing PhD research, Gai previously served as a preschool teacher and director for 22 years. She also delivered professional development, consultancy and coordinated the development of EYLF Resources project with Community Child Care Co-operative NSW. She now lectures in the Early Years Degree at the University of Wollongong and lives on the beautiful South Coast of NSW with her husband, cat, and sometimes-at-home adult children. Her research is focused on early childhood visual arts pedagogy and conceptually draws on John Dewey’s philosophies of art and education and the Reggio Emilia educational approach. Awards received include: IER NSW Best Applied Research Project (2014); Jean Denton Memorial Scholarship (2011); ACE award for Outstanding Achievement in Education (2008); REAIE scholarship (2008); CeeCees Advocacy Award (2007).

Prelude:
An invitation in the August 2014 edition of ‘The Challenge’ to reflect on how the Reggio Emilia educational project has influenced me professionally and personally immediately provoked memories from throughout my teaching career. Encounters with the ideas underpinning pedagogy in Reggio Emilia have repeatedly reignited my passion as an early childhood teacher and have provoked me to advocacy, debate, research in practice, leadership and now doctoral studies and university teaching. Much of the credit I give to the project in Reggio Emilia for my ongoing growth as an
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**Reggio Emilia as part of my ‘self’**

"The world we have experienced becomes an integral part of the self that acts and is acted upon in further experience. In their physical occurrence, things and experiences pass and are gone. But something of their meaning and value is retained as an integral part of self….It becomes a home and the home is part of our everyday experience" (Dewey 1934, p.108).

Engagement with the values that underpin the Italian Reggio Emilia project have spiraled and integrated their way into my being for more than twenty years. So much so that these values and meanings are now my professional homeland – a ‘place’ for ideological encounter and reflection that sustains and transforms me both professionally and personally. Indeed the provocative values of the Reggio Emilia approach have steered me toward my current role as a PhD candidate and university lecturer. This paper will reflect upon several encounters with the values of Reggio Emilia that have kindled moments of illumination, transition and professional growth. Such shared reflections may encourage us as we construct our own professional homeland of values and ideas while together we honour the inspiration of the Reggio Emilia experience.
Value for art

As a young preschool teacher my personal interest in visual art saw me attend a 1990 public forum at the Art Gallery of Western Australia. Regretfully I do not recall the name of the presenter, however the documentary film “To make a Portrait of a Lion” (1987) ignited my desire to integrate visual art experiences across the curriculum to support children to connect with their aesthetic instincts. I consequently instigated several visual art explorations within my own pre-primary class and connected regularly with the local art gallery. These experiences convinced me that very young children can be supported to richly engage with the stories and the visual art techniques found in artworks. I was inspired by the ways in which the educators in Reggio Emilia enacted their respect for young children’s intelligence and capability. Their holistic and cross-curricular application of visual art methods to facilitate children’s explorations of the Lion statues in Piazza San Prospero concurrently challenged me to respect and empower children and refreshed my approach to teaching and research alongside children.

I could never have imagined that decades later I would appear in my own portrait with those regal medieval lions when I attended the 2008 and 2012 International Study Tours to Reggio Emilia, nor that I would be engaged in PhD research that is exploring educator beliefs about visual art pedagogy. The journey that led me, both physically and philosophically, to Reggio Emilia and beyond has been one of encounter with the ideas and values of the Reggio Emilia educational project.

Value for ideas

From time to time I have wondered what it is about this philosophical approach that so inspires and ignites the passion of those invested in the education of young children. While a range of educational theories may inform pedagogical reflection,
why do the values of the Reggio Emilia approach seem to sustain holistic philosophical and educational transformation? I believe that the ideas emanating from Reggio Emilia resonate so profoundly because, rather than offering theoretical absolutes, these timeless ideals reflect the core human values that we all yearn for. The ideology that underpins the values of the Reggio Emilia project nurtures a desire for democracy, meaning, human rights, respect, equity, joy and beauty. Dahlberg and Moss eloquently summarise saying,

“The aesthetic dimension and poetic languages in schools and the learning process is above all, a source of hope for all those who believe in the possibility of an affirmative and inventive pedagogy that is open for connections, affect, intensity and emergence; a pedagogy that is open to children’s potential and has the capacity to listen to expressive events – even intensity and affect – and to be open to that which has not yet been put into words; a pedagogy that finds joy in the unexpected, dares to follow projects in motion without knowing where they may lead, always prepared for surprise and risk; a pedagogy that adds to the world rather than subtracting as is all too common in education. In a world obsessed with quantification, reductionism, normalization and predetermined outcomes, this pedagogy gives cause to believe in the world again” (cited in Vecchi 2010, pxxii).

Value for renewal

A renewed hope for the ‘values that really matter’ in education was my experience when, during a time of professional challenge, I sought to reignite my passion for early childhood education. My desire to engage in meaningful pedagogy had been ensnared by the demands of leadership, viability, budgets, political advocacy and
change management. The opportunity to attend the 2008 conference in Reggio Emilia as an REAIE scholarship recipient was the career turning point that released and reconnected my heart and my vocation as a teacher. I was captivated by the story of Malaguzzi’s advocacy for children. By taking preschool to the piazzas and porticos of Reggio Emilia and by making children’s learning visible to families, communities and the children themselves, Malaguzzi demanded that children be valued as citizens in their community. In this example I realised that my advocate heart along with my desire for children to experience respect, beauty and joy could be fuelled and find expression through this ‘pedagogy of hope’.

**Converging influences**

Following my participation in the 2008 study tour several experiences converged to project me into a new phase of professional possibility. I frequently mused about how to interpret and apply the inspiration of Reggio Emilia, and in particular their value for children, for beauty and joy as a human right. I sought to interpret their aesthetic ways of knowing and making meaning to my own teaching context. At the time I was actively lobbying for young children, and the profession of early childhood education, to be valued so that all levels of government would support young children and families to access well-funded, high quality services. I was struck with the notion that children in our local community were rarely visible, nor welcome to participate and actively contribute to their own community.

Could I, as exemplified in the preschools of Reggio Emilia, combine advocacy and art-focused pedagogy? Could the language of visual art support me to make our community, the children’s families and teachers and even the children themselves more aware of children’s great capacity to make meaning and express ideas? Could visual art projects support children’s ideas and voices to be heard outside the walls of
the preschool and therefore raise the communities’ value for children’s rights as citizens?

Convinced that this was the case I embarked on several projects. We held an annual exhibition in conjunction with the local council and other preschools in the area to share children’s artwork and the documentation of their ideas and voices in the community library. In support of this project, several successful grants funded the employment of local artist, Jill Talbot, to work collaboratively with the children, families and educators in the preschool service. Inspired by the example of the role of the atelierista in Reggio Emilia, I believed that Jill’s role as visual artist in the preschool must not be restricted to that of a visiting visual art specialist who would do isolated weekly art activities with the children. Rather, I determined that prior to Jill working with the children, the whole team of educators and any interested parents would undertake several art workshops using the methods and materials that we planned to introduce to the children. I intuitively believed that unless the art processes, materials and methods were demystified for everyone involved, there would be a risk that the project would be series of one-off art activities driven by an artist, rather than an engaged and ongoing hands-on pedagogical approach for the whole team. I hoped that throughout the weekly program the teachers and educators, having participated in the adult workshops and having observed the art experiences that Jill and I undertook with the children, might have the confidence to extend on these experiences with the children independently. The projects were certainly significant for the children, staff and families involved. However, these projects also led me to question whether the visual art beliefs and confidence of early childhood teachers and educators could either support or stagnate the process of learning in, through and about visual arts.
Looking beyond my own service I suspected that many early childhood educators lacked the confidence, knowledge and skills to deliver visual art experiences that extend beyond sensory exploration and close-ended craft objects to actively teach visual art skills and methods using a wide range of quality art materials. In fact, having witnessed what children are capable of in both Reggio Emilia and in our own visual art projects I began to despair about the proliferation of poor quality materials, stencils, colouring-in sheets and identical productions covering the walls of many Australian services. I saw very little that positioned visual art as one of the many languages by which children are able to make and communicate meaning and wondered what was going on in the Australian context.

Value for research

Concurrent to these experiences, I was writing several articles for “The Challenge” as a follow up to my REAIE scholarship participation in the 2008 Reggio Emilia international conference. As a most encouraging mentor, Avis Ridgeway challenged me to consider possible new identities. Might I have something to offer in the way of pedagogical provocation and advocacy through research and writing? Did I have in me (as Avis suggested) the potential to undertake post-graduate study? Increasingly I began to entertain that possibility, particularly in light of Malaguzzi’s (1994) appeal for teachers to position themselves as co-learners and co-researchers alongside children. I was increasingly being challenged to consider that, in addition to valuing the theories and knowledge that are ‘out there’, we should value the theories that we develop as practitioners and to see ourselves as the authors of pedagogical theory in our own contexts. If I wanted answers to the gap that seemed to exist between educator statements about the importance and centrality of art in early childhood and actual practice, then perhaps I should be the one engaging in research?
My consideration of these ideas was provoked by New Zealand educator Wendy Lee (IEU ECS Conference, 2010) who shared Dweck’s (2006) theory about how the impact of educator mindset on children’s learning and potential. Illustrating the concept of growth versus fixed mindset, Lee asked a room of approximately two hundred university qualified early childhood teachers to raise their hand if they thought that they could undertake a PhD and only three of us raised our hands. While disappointed at the lack of self-belief evident in the early childhood teaching profession, this response was not too surprising. In hindsight, perhaps this moment added more fuel to the fire of my increasing desire to explore my intersecting passions as a post-grad student. Following the PhD question the participants at the conference were asked to indicate if they thought of themselves as artists in their work with children and only four educators raised their hands. Given that many people equate the label of being artistic with the with the capacity to draw realistically or to be a professional artist, perhaps this low response was indicative of the common confusion about we define ‘artistic’? Nevertheless this again prompted me to wonder about the possible affect that educator’s artistic self-efficacy beliefs may have on pedagogy, curriculum and children’s creative learning.

**An issue for research**

After more than twenty years as a preschool teacher and director I had heard many educators preface any discussion about visual art with the caveat that they were ‘not artistic’ and ‘not very creative’ or defer all visual art programming decisions to the one person on their team who was the ‘arty’ one. I was motivated to better understand how the visual art beliefs and confidence of early childhood teachers and educators might influence pedagogical provisions and interactions with children. Most importantly, I wanted to move beyond making assumptions about the visual art beliefs
and pedagogy of Australian early years educators to identify what those visual art beliefs, knowledge and pedagogy actually were. So, I took the leap and enrolled to undertake postgrad research!

**A theory challenge**

As I commenced study a theoretical challenge arose. Early in the research process one must identify a theoretical or conceptual framework that will inform and provide guidance in sorting and interpreting data. With my research focus on early childhood educators’ visual art beliefs and pedagogy I naturally sought to draw upon the Reggio Emilia educational project, and their value for aesthetics and poetic languages. However both my supervisors and the educators in Reggio Emilia reminded me that an educational approach should not be regarded as a theory. Therefore, in order to develop a robust framework to support my reflection about the visual art beliefs and practice of early childhood educators I co-located and synthesised John Dewey’s constructivist philosophies of democracy, aesthetics and education with the constructivist core values of the Reggio Emilia educational project. What emerged from this synthesis was not only a rich framework to support my research but a deeper appreciation for the way the Reggio Emilia educational project was founded and sustained by its socio-political and historical grounding in multiple sources of inspiration, by which they “extracted theoretical principles” to support their work (Malaguzzi 1998, p.58; Lindsay 2015).

**(RE) discovering Dewey**

Through exploring the theoretical underpinnings of praxis in Reggio Emilia, Malaguzzi re-introduced, re-enlightened and enriched my engagement with Deweyan ideas. I immersed myself in Dewey’s rich ideas about active education, democratic
transformation and aesthetics and repeatedly identified Dewey’s ideas reflected and exemplified in the core values and pedagogy of the Reggio Emilia approach. Further, investigations undertaken to justify and underpin the conceptual framework synthesis found that an influential network of Malaguzzi’s Italian contemporaries actively shared, debated and adapted Dewey’s ideas and reveal his significant influence on the foundational values upon which practice in Reggio Emilia is based (Lindsay 2015). This alignment identifies Deweyan concepts within Reggio Emilia’s constructivist values about the image of the child, community engagement, the environment as the third teacher, art as a language, the inclusion of the atelier, the role of the atelierista, collaborative project work, the role of the teacher as a co-constructor of knowledge and the belief that education can bring about democratic and social transformation. This research experience has been an exciting journey, which has enriched my thinking about contemporary pedagogical contexts. The opportunity to think deeply about the ideas of these great educators in relation to my research has been rendered even more joyful through their rich use of language.

**A delight in language and metaphor**

The use of metaphor in the Reggio Emilia educational project delights my appreciation for linguistic imagery. Like creating a work of art, Cameron and Low (1999) explain that the use of metaphor can render complex ideas more accessible. Whether encountering the ideas shared by Malaguzzi in the ‘hundred languages’ poem Malaguzzi (cited in Edwards et al. 2012) or considering collaborative idea-sharing as a process of ‘bouncing and catching balls’ (Edwards et al. 1998, p.181) the poetic way ideas are presented holds its own romantic attraction. I find the same poetic resonance in the works of John Dewey who saw emotional engagement with ideas as central to inquiry (1916).
Dewey’s prose moves me. His pragmatic, hopeful passion about education as the central transformative force for communities who both seek change and value democracy brings to mind the hopeful pedagogy that has been exercised in Reggio Emilia for more than six decades. Dewey’s early-twentieth-century style of writing evokes for me the same metaphorical lyricism that resonates through the translations of Italian ideas emanating from Reggio Emilia. Indeed, other scholars have also recognised Dewey and Malaguzzi’s common metaphorical style with Gandini (2012) and Schwall (2005) both noting their similar use of mountain peaks as a metaphor for creativity. Dewey (1934) expounded the need to render artistic processes and artwork more accessible by grounding them in everyday experience. He urged that art should, instead of being “remitted to a separate realm, where it is cut off from that association with the materials and aims of every other form of human effort, undergoing and achievement”, be grounded in everyday experience (Dewey 1934, p.2). To illustrate this point, he stated “Mountain peaks do not float unsupported; they do not even just rest upon the earth. They are the earth in one of its manifest operations” (1934, p.2). Compare this to Malaguzzi’s metaphorical request that “our task, regarding creativity, is to help children to climb their own mountains, as high as possible” (1998, p.77).

Such metaphorical imagery transports me back to the conferences in Reggio Emilia where I became transfixed and transformed by the beauty of a pedagogy that seeks to enlighten, enrich and transform lives. Taking notes at a bi-lingual conference manifests competing delights. In the first instance you are transported by the musical tones of passionate Italian educators almost singing their stories as they seek to share ‘what really matters’ about the work they do. Then as these stories are translated into English, a mere echo of Italian metaphor and imagery, frantic scribble aims to record the beautiful ideas presented. The opportunity to alternatively scribe and reflect is
supported by the to-and-fro of the bi-lingual duet – a gift of time to revel in seductive ideas.

**Value for uncertainty**

One of the most seductive values of the Reggio Emilia project is the idea that educators should adopt the attitude of a researcher (Rinaldi 2006) and in Malaguzzi’s words “never have too many certainties” (1998, p.52). Dewey also valued uncertainty (Rankin 2004) and explained that reflective inquiry is born from the experience of doubt (Garrison 1996). He insisted that a willingness to question education itself must be central to educational processes (Hansen 2006).

Indeed, qualitative research demands an attitude of uncertainty. While making my own position and frameworks explicit, the process of iterative research demands that I embrace ‘not knowing’ and put my assumptions aside to interpret and represent the voices of the participants in my study (Creswell 2007). In the midst of doctoral research, when multiple ideas and possibilities often tie me in knots, Dewey (1934) comfortably reminds me that achieving equilibrium will only be possible as a result of effort and tension. He urges me to adopt the philosophy that “accepts life and experience in all its uncertainty, mystery, doubt, and half-knowledge and turns that experience upon itself to deepen and intensify its own qualities” (Dewey 1934, p.35). Both Dewey and Malaguzzi urge me to value this time of professional wondering and to maintain my intent to “let go of some old certainties in order to grow and be challenged to change for the better” (Lindsay 2008b, p.17).

**A proposal for inspiration**

As I identified the philosophical alignment between Dewey’s ideas and pedagogy in Reggio Emilia I admit to feeling somewhat nervous about how my proposal would be...
received. Would purist devotees of the Reggio Emilia approach be offended at my suggestion that many core values of praxis in the project are firmly grounded in Dewey’s educational and aesthetic ideals? Would highlighting the role played by Malaguzzi’s contemporaries, including Bruno Ciari and Lamberto Borghi with whom Malaguzzi debated and interpreted Deweyan philosophy (Lindsay 2015) be considered an attempt to undermine the posthumous pedestal upon which Malaguzzi has been placed in many hearts and minds? Perhaps for some this may be the case. However my examination of the socio-political reception of Dewey’s work in Italy and the significant alignment between John Dewey’s ideas with practice in Reggio Emilia has not in any way undermined my appreciation of the core values that underpin pedagogy in Reggio Emilia project. Rather this re-cognition of Dewey’s ideas, as interpreted in Reggio Emilia, has heightened my appreciation of the layers of history, collaboration and collegial debate necessary in any educational context that seeks reformation.

No movement for social and educational transformation can be achieved in isolation. Indeed, my alignment of the two philosophies celebrates and confirms that sound pedagogical ideas are timeless. Quality practice related to hands-on, constructivist and collaborative inquiry, which democratically respects children as active learners, transcends time, culture and place.

If I hope that my thesis might in any way inspire and challenge visual art practice in early childhood contexts, I too must embrace the rich collegial debate and openness to new ideas that Malaguzzi exemplified. Like both Dewey and Malaguzzi I must use all the languages at my disposal to embrace uncertainty and grapple with the research process to share ideas and to question and challenge assumptions.
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