

Being a Teacher *IN* Research with Children

Listening, documenting and discussing

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Reflection by Liz Battersby

On a chilly, late winter's day, it was wonderful to be warmed by the ideas and provocations put forward by Margo Hobba and Chris Celada, both of whom have a deservedly stellar reputation for their insight about young children's learning, their deep understanding of the principles of the Reggio Emilia approach, and their ability to provoke a meaningful response to the professional learning they offer. In introducing Margo and Chris, REANZ committee member, Lorraine Manuela read us Loris Malaguzzi's poem, *The Hundred Languages of Children*, before reminding us of the Ministry of Education mantra, *the child at the heart of the matter*, urging us to think of this throughout the day.

Margo and Chris are concerned that much professional learning for teachers tends to separate *"the head from the body"*. Hence, their superbly designed approach supported us in delving a little deeper under the skin of children's learning, and to be more adept teacher-researchers. To misquote Malaguzzi a little, they provoked and enabled us to think *with* our hands, to do *with* our heads, to listen *and* speak, and to understand *with* joy.

As Margo and Chris guided us to explore the theories and practices associated with being a teacher *IN* research with children, we returned continually to their fundamental question:

What does it mean, "to know"?

They suggested that knowing, knowledge, and to know (epistemology) underpins all that happens in education, involves all of the senses, encompasses knowing in theory and in practice, and includes researching, observing, documenting, and inquiry. We explored the idea that to know is cognitive, but not just that. To know involves self-awareness, and the overused, but apt metaphor of the journey rather than the destination. In groups, we discussed the notion of children's "coming-to-know"; how they show they know, their discussions and play. Everything a child observes, the community and culture the child grows up in and the child's intrinsic motivation all contribute to the child's coming-to-know. We reflected that our coming-to-know is an ongoing process, depending upon context, what is meaningful to us, and our own perceptions.

Margo and Chris then offered the idea of knowing as a system of relations, suggesting that when documenting the learning of a small group, we capture much more than with a large group, when we can only document superficial traces. In Reggio Emilia, teachers work with small groups to understand their ideas and their coming-to-know, before the ideas are shared with the bigger group of children. In helping us to explore the question of what knowing is, they took us through the emergence and embedding of the Reggio approach. As it is a complex story, Margo and Chris chose a small thread relevant to our context on the day, telling us that while Reggio Emilia's origins are ancient, it is a modern, innovative city. They attribute the fact that Reggio education project continued to grow and thrive, to an entwining of critical factors, not least of which included the physical devastation of the second World War and its fracturing effect on families. Women were and continue to be pivotal to both the birth and blossoming of the Reggio approach. These women sought a deeply seated democratic society and an education system that fostered and welcomed diversity and listening to different ideas. They sought a just, civil, democratic society that would grow out of a just, civil, democratic education system.

The Reggio educators describe the story thus:

“The story is “partisan”, on the side of children, who are credited with potentials, intelligences, rights and cultures. The themes of identity and memory are two precious “keys”, red threads running through the story. The story itself is a weaving, made up of many voices and many people: careful listening, passionate friendships and fortunate encounters always coming after great toil, real battles, and deep study and research.”

~ *One City, Many Children: Reggio Emilia, a history of the present.* Documentation panel at the Malaguzzi Centre, July 2015

Margo and Chris explained that the Reggio founders chose to pursue the idea of democratic schools, to look for the intelligence and competence of children rather than deficits, a perspective upheld resolutely by Carlina Rinaldi in her discussions on the “competent child”. They chose to adopt an attitude of research, which is difficult. They believed that errors are an opportunity to learn and welcomed doubt and uncertainty, despite making teachers uncomfortable, always pushing boundaries. They chose to focus on relationships: between people, between people and materials, and - significantly - between materials and materials.

Margo and Chris commented that an attitude of research means not looking for answers, but looking for questions, and recalled hearing Reggio educator, Lella Gandini’s explanation in the 1990s, “We are asking ourselves many questions: What is knowledge? What is a child? What is a teacher?”

I recollect that when pedagogista, Elena Giacomini, visited us in New Zealand in April, she told us that, along with exploring what is knowledge, they are considering:

How do children acquire knowledge?
How do they process and organise knowledge?
How do children carry out research?
How do teachers and children construct knowledge together?

Margo and Chris referred us to, *Art and Creativity in Reggio Emilia* (2010), by former atelierista at the Diana School, Veà Vecchi. She postulates four sources of knowledge that she believes cannot be looked at in isolation. Rather, she suggests that they are always plaited together, and there are many interconnected ways of knowing and coming-to-know. Margo and Chris helped us to examine these, during the day:

Rationality	- reason, logic, intellect, comprehension, synthesis...
Imagination	- vision, mental awareness...
Emotion	- passion, feeling...
Aesthetics	- creative, inventive, sensitive, harmonious...

The Reggio teachers developed pedagogical documentation as a tool for research, an act of deliberate noticing. To illustrate, Margo and Chris revisited the now-famous series of documentation from Nido Arcobaleno infant-toddler centre recorded in 1979 about Laura and the Watch. They told us that Gandini and Rinaldi (2009) explained that in learning to be teachers IN research with children, the Reggio educators were striving “to find the real child to whom nobody had paid attention up until then... We knew so little beyond... growth charts, teething schedules...” Margo and Chris said that the teacher’s photographs of ten-month-old Laura proved to be a pivotal moment in the Reggio educators’ understanding of the potential of documentation. Mindful of parents’ inner conflict when leaving their children in childcare, Laura’s teacher had taken the photos to share with her parents, thinking they were endearing. However, when Loris Malaguzzi saw them, with all his expertise in understanding meaning, he recognised something remarkable: a very young child forms an internal theory and tests it out. I was reminded of Stefania Giamminuti comments in New Zealand last year, when she said that Malaguzzi could give them

another - quite exceptional - lens and his interpretation “opened up a world” for these teachers, which signalled the beginning of teachers in Reggio Emilia seeing documentation as a tool for learning, rather than just sharing.

Margo and Chris pointed out that knowing is ongoing, emphasising that we must ask ourselves how children are coming-to-know, for this enables us to support their learning strategies more skilfully. This is the work of the teacher-researcher. They regard noticing as rather like seeing something for the first time, for it generates and is generated by wonder, curiosity, questioning, empathy, and surprise. They suggest that noticing is often on the border of what we know and don't know. In their noticing, teachers in Reggio Emilia look for the extraordinary in the ordinary. Malaguzzi encouraged teachers to observe without having to explain, believing observation to be a strategy aimed at transforming practice.

To help us observe and notice more skilfully and better understand the key ideas we had been exploring during the day, Margo and Chris shared video documentation of Margo's grandson, Felix's (2yr 10 mo.) exploration of handbags, which we focused upon in detail. He was researching the handbags and we researched how he was coming to know about handbags, both through our own documentation and through “playing with” the materials ourselves - our own handbags. We recorded and shared our own noticing. I noted that Margo did not prompt her grandson, as he investigated the bags, and that he had previously noticed a purpose for handbags - shopping. I observed he was moving constantly, as he explored the handbags and wondered if his moving was part of his coming-to-know.

Following this, Margo and Chris invited us to investigate our own and our partner's handbag in considerable detail, which helped to extend our skills of noticing and observing. We then viewed Felix's encounters with handbags again, before Margo and Chris asked us to consider what we noticed now and how building relations with our bags changed our noticing about Felix's coming to know the bags. Each group chose one idea to share with the whole group and Margo and Chris probed us further: What does it mean to know? Do we all know in the same way? How can we know something? They explained the term **Reconnaissance** that Malaguzzi used to refer to coming to know something again or “re-knowing”, so that the assumptions an adult has are set aside when children work with materials. I later found that in their final reflections in *The Hundred Languages of Children* (1998), Edwards, Gandini and Forman encouraged teachers to think in terms of “reconnaissance”, instead of “planning” and always to listen to children, even when the theme of a project might have been decided. Margo and Chris's encouragement of our intense focus on handbags helped us to develop an understanding of reconnaissance, but they reminded us that in Reggio Emilia the focus could just as easily be on something more abstract, such as desire.

Margo and Chris continued to encourage us to consider how we could know a handbag, and we reflected on different perspectives about these objects, identifying some of the different ways we came to know, mindful of Veia Vecchi's viewpoint that they had drawn our attention to:

"For us educators in Reggio, each discipline - or rather language - is made up of rationality, imagination, emotion and aesthetics. Rationality without feeling and empathy, like imagination without cognition and rationality build up partial, incomplete human knowledge." (Ibid)

Working in pairs helped us to probe Margo and Chris's research question, “How is your partner coming to know this material?” While one person investigated a piece of playdough, the other documented the process. Through our documentation, we reflected on what we noticed about our partner's processes in coming to know playdough.

Margo and Chris believe it is important to have a research question before documenting and although this is not easy, it is useful for clarifying one's own thinking. In a paired activity, my research question was, “How is my partner coming to know playdough?” When I revisited my

documentation, I added drawings to develop my written observations. What surprised me was how quickly my partner worked with the playdough, as soon as she picked it up. Margo and Chris showed an example of how Margo had documented this same learning experience, starting with drawings, symbols and notes, before twice revisiting to add further detail.

Margo and Chris then helped us to explore the concept of **Confronto**, meaning to put in contrast. We put our documentation of each other's coming to know playdough in confronto, looking for similarities, differences, and analogies. We then explored two images of children's creations with playdough to help us understand how they come to know playdough, deconstructing all the different forms and shapes they had made. We looked closely, noticing carefully, before we replicated what the children had made, using our own playdough.

With guidance from Margo and Chris, we considered the notion of materials as languages and discussed the small parts that could make up a "language". They suggested these might include an "alphabet". For example, a flat, large shape and a larger, rolled shape might come together to form something more complex - an alphabet. They cited an example of children's investigations about string in Reggio Emilia - small forms put together to create something larger, an alphabet of string. They provoked further thinking with images of other "alphabets": paper napkins; light and white tissue paper; hand actions with clay. They led us to consider the concept of a ball, formed through a relationship between hands, mind, heart, and the material, which can generate skills, ideas, desires, problems, shapes, forms when brought together. Engaging the mind, the emotional aspect of exploration involves the pleasure of manipulating the material. Undoubtedly, we will now be more sensitive to the interactions and complexities that come together for the child to make a ball.

Margo and Chris explained that one of the most difficult decisions is how to proceed. They suggested asking children about the challenges and problems they encountered, and what they had to think about and solve. Of course, they realise that this is much more difficult with infants and toddlers, who they told us Giacopini thinks are the hardest group to document because we don't necessarily know what they think. They urged us to consider children's visible thinking, reminding us that children have the right to clarify what they are learning. Firstly, because there is a danger of creating incorrect documentation, and secondly, this is a metacognitive process and children have the right to comment on their own learning and to be able to identify how to learn how to learn. Margo and Chris believe that asking children what they were thinking or doing helps ensure that we capture what we might otherwise have overlooked. They suggested that we return to our work with children, mindful of the importance of looking for the unexpected. I was reminded of the value of Malaguzzi's use of the metaphor of throwing and catching a ball to illustrate the dynamic of children's learning. When I suggested this to Margo and Chris, they agreed, although they perceptively added that children throw us 1000 balls and we have to choose which one to respond to.

As this thought-provoking day unfolded, we kept the child at the heart of the matter, as Margo and Chris threw us many balls, back and forth, in "a sequence of exchanges", through which we co-constructed "ideas and understanding." We were certainly absorbed - listening, documenting, creating, discussing, while they artfully guided us in making sense of the challenges, thoughts, interests, and desires that captivate children; and in making choices about possibilities for proceeding that engage both children and teachers in advancing their learning.