



Practitioner Researcher

“Just people, legs, arms, and heads”: The process of arranging, organising and fitting together with reference to Emilia Reggio and Deleuzean theory

Ann Margaret Coballes

Master of Education Student, New Zealand Tertiary College

Perspectives on learning about the arts in early childhood education have become more complex as researchers seek an approach that accommodates ‘chaos’ in children’s creative work. Lark-Horovitz, Lewis, and Luca (1973) describe children’s self-initiated drawings as descriptions of their whole being, their body and ‘chaotic’ personality (as seen in Thompson, 2007). As children are naturally inclined to use their bodies with the aid of their resources and materials around them to make sense of what is going on every day, it is a normal phenomenon for children to reflect their physicality, which, according to Olsson (2013), reflects their complex sense of the world. This paper will refer to two projects in the early childhood setting that reference original and creative ways in which children construct a social culture that forms part of a wider social cultural context involving the community. In addition, a self-reflection of personal learning and experience within the arts will be discussed and an ideal art activity, with reference to children’s own creative voices and imagination.

The Crowd

The Reggio Emilia approach has been recognised worldwide for the projects or ‘progettazione’ that they create with children. According to Rinaldi, in Reggio Emilia, children are seen as “strong and competent and as unique individuals with rights rather than simply needs” (as cited in Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998, p. 114). One of the biggest projects developed in Emilia Reggio was “The Crowd”. Vecchi (1996) writes about how the project began from the time when the children came back to school after the summer vacation. One child described his experience on a summer evening: “...In the evening, it was full of people, people going up and people going down. You couldn’t see anything – just people, legs, arms, and heads” (as cited in Filippini & Vecchi, 1996, p. 142). The Reggio educators thought this would be a worthy project, as it aroused the other children’s interests and they were able to relate to the sharing, giving their own comments, experiences and interpretations of the subject. Vecchi (1996) believed that there was “shared meaning” (p. 142), in that the children were aware of the tendency for crowds to gather in the summer months.

In preparation for the project, the children discussed different images of crowds. As they got deeper in their exploration, they decided to create drawings of their crowds. Their teacher then brought up what they had previously discussed, and compared them with their drawings. The children then started questioning the



directionalities of the people in the crowd in their drawings. They also included the relationships of people in the crowd that may have influenced the directions of where the people were heading. To understand the issue better, they agreed on creating a crowd themselves. This was accomplished by one child being placed "... in the middle of the room and the others situated on the four sides, which highlights the different points of view." (p. 146). They then shifted to other points of view, such looking down on a crowd as from a skyscraper. Afterwards, they investigated the human figure from multiple perspectives (front, sides and back), in different contexts, using drawings, clay and wire. They even had a large, coloured projection on one of their classroom walls and "... simulated a town square where the children could play and mix into the crowd" (p. 149).

The children performed another type of crowd, which was to assume an identity and gather together. This stimulated a study of images, as provoked by their teachers and talk about what they thought about one person in the picture, in terms of their "identity, thoughts, and presumed desires." (p. 150). After some discussion, children decided to work through drawings or clay. With the clay task, they decided that each one would have a specific assignment to do. Different children produced different parts of the body, which they then connected altogether. The drawing group cut out and coloured their people, and made them stand up in different directions and set them all up on one flat surface. The children also decided to use cameras to photograph their own interpretations of what a crowd is (Filippini & Vecchi, 1996). At the end of the project, these children were able to successfully characterise a crowd and the difference between their initial graphic representations and their experience.

The Creations

The second project was set in a Swedish preschool and, just like the crowd project, the children and the teachers negotiated the meaning, this time of "Creations" (Lind, 2005). This project started with a misinterpretation of boisterous behaviour by children, boys, while playing some rough games in the playroom with a mirror on the wall and a mattress. Luckily, instead of asking the children to stop, the teacher paused, was able to manage her instinct and ask them what they were doing. The boys blurted out "We are making... Creations!" (p. 256). There was a reprieve and the children were given the opportunity to discuss "what creations are, what creations are not and how they can make creations" (p. 258). The teachers' jotted down the comments and documented with photographs anything that, from that moment, related to "Creations". The teachers and children all worked together to discover "Creations", through working with a variety of materials and extended discussion at the same time.

As the centre gathered together photographs of sculptures that they made out of their bodies, piled on top of each other, their teachers encouraged the children to reinterpret the photographs using clay and other materials. Aside from that, the children also made use of the camera and requested the teachers to join them by directing them in taking the shots while they were acting in their creations, making a sculpture with their bodies. The use of scrap materials in making creations was also part of the project.



The Crowd and Creations: Deleuze and Guattari

In most projects with children, if not all, there is always the desire to learn, to get something out of a play context, to merge each other's ideas to arrive at another dimension of new wonders and new questions. Deleuze and Guattari developed the concept of assemblage as "the process of arranging, organising and fitting together" (as cited in Parr, 2010, p. 18). Both of these projects showcased in this paper are similar in terms of how the project started: a conversation took place. The crowd project showed how the children had varying views about what a crowd was; based on their own experiences and from the content of their conversations, the children tried to formulate their experience into one idea. They experienced the process of 'assemblage' as they worked together. The 'assemblage of desire' is to have a shared and negotiated meaning. Similarly, in the creations project, the children also had an initial discourse about what creations are and, as they shared their experience and interpretation of the subject, they built upon each other's thoughts and ideas. For both of the conversations to flourish, the children needed each other's contributions to arrive at their negotiated meaning. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) used the word desire as the "unconscious production or real always caught up in an assemblage" (as cited in Olsson, 2013, p. 233). Through the desire to learn and the desire to work, an assemblage of thoughts, ideas and experiences from the participants emerge from the group.

Another common principle between these two projects is Deleuze and Guattari's "deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation" (as seen in Parr, 2010, p. 69). Deterritorialisation is "the cutting edge of an assemblage, to disarticulate, a movement producing change, the creative potential of an assemblage, to free up the fixed relations while exposing it to new organisations" (p. 69). While these two projects had their initial discourse before working with other materials and resources, the constant throwing of ideas, thoughts and experiences to each other went on through this process of deterritorialisation. The growing assemblage of their subject of discussion is cut off by new ideas being thrown in. These new ideas somehow disrupt the understanding of the subject but the disruption encourages movement, which brings about change in the children's general understanding.

The process of deterritorialisation is to be considered in its creative potential or capacity. The new ideas forms a new organisation. On the other hand, reterritorialisation is when "a territory is established once more...hence, it is tied to the very possibility of change immanent to a given territory" (p. 69). Each child being a participant in the project tries to accommodate a new concept to build upon his/her own understandings. As the child hears and sees new ideas, he/she deterritorialises as they process new information and link it to their own existing knowledge. In the perspective of the whole group, as new information comes in, it deterritorialises each of their own understandings. As the children are all working towards a shared/negotiated meaning, they each try to make sense out of this new information to build upon what they have currently agreed on, which, at this point, they are all reterritorialising.

These concepts can be applied to the process of each, in understanding how these two projects engaged their subjects through different kinds of experience, such as graphic, live body performance, clay, wire, photographs, wall projections, and diorama. Each child underwent a deterritorialisation as he/she



tried to interpret the shared understanding through a new medium. A child may ask: "How can I present this through drawing or wire or clay or diorama or in a live body performance?" Each medium requires its own knowledge and skills, so the child processes a strategy for each one of them. They then undergo a reterritorialisation as soon as they have accomplished a new experience in another medium. The attributes of newness and change are present in this new presentation and computation.

The cliché 'process over product' as an educational approach can be related to Deleuze's theory of becoming. Becoming describes "the continual production of difference...the pure movement evident in changes between particular events...the very dynamism of change tending towards no particular goal or end-state." (Parr, 2010, p. 26). While naturally and easily, product wins over process sometimes, if one is willing to pause and reflect on the importance of process in learning, then every bit of change involved within it is wonder and excitement. Becoming is always involved in a process, if not the process itself. It cannot be called as such, if it was not for the change involved. It is continuous and never ending. In both projects, the children searched for answers to their own queries in varying ways and methods, employing their self-generated evolving concepts from discourse to graphic presentation, then to live model, then to clay, etcetera. What happens in between the stages is what becoming is all about. Becoming is what occurs in between two ideas, thoughts and experiences.

Change and Reflection on Practice

What made the link to each of the elements of the discourse? The answer is change. Davies says that, "By introducing multiple voices and very different life histories into the mix, we facilitate the process" (Wyatt, Gale, Gannon & Davies, 2010, p. 740). Change is brought about by experiences. Change is what happens in the midst of becoming, from the very traditional sense of teaching highlighting teacher controlled activities to the most appropriate practices with the focus on children's interests. I can recall doing a number of artworks with children that have been preconceived by a team of teachers, including myself, directly instructing the children what to do and correcting their mistakes there and then. We even manipulated the outcome of the artwork when it did not seem to look right in the traditional educator's eyes. This showed a lack of respect, seeing the children as incompetent individuals with nothing to contribute but their blank selves ready to be impressed on. "The neo-classical tradition is based on the view that the arts embody a certain cultural heritage into which every student should be initiated." (Rizvi, 1994, p. 85). Osberg and Biesta (2008) spoke about planned enculturation and how education is not about 'training' but personal experience, initiating the children into their own personal concepts of what art should be like. Enculturating children into what everyone has been used to in the way of life and training them into ways that are acceptable in our own standards and with our values is not education. These children are people. They have the same rights as we do to contribute to the construction of our ongoing culture. Each of them has their own set of ideas, thoughts and experiences to help shape this culture. They have their minds to use for thinking and creating, feelings to express, and physical faculties and capabilities to deliver their intentions of being co-constructors in their own learning and education.



The personal encounter with the Reggio philosophy has given me new light. Teaching was brought up to a whole new level and dimension. It is the kind of dimension that brought much sense, personally, as a whole. Children are seen as adults. They are listened to, respected and are looked upon as individuals with equal rights. They are trusted with decision making in terms of strategies they come up with when doing projects. Rinaldi explained this about children:

Their need and desire to communicate and interact with others emerge at birth and are essential elements for survival and identification with the species. This probably explains why children are so eager to express themselves within the context of a plurality of symbolic languages, and why children are also very open to exchanges and reciprocity as deeds and acts of love that they not only want to receive but also want to offer. (as cited in Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998, p. 114)

The image of the child above plays an important role in the framework of children's educational philosophy. The children are not only part of their culture, but they are considered players and shapers as well. The Deleuzian theories, philosophies and concepts open the processes of children, as discussed in Sellers (2010), with regards to their curricular performativity, milieus, their rhizomatic way of thinking, the imaginary of becoming. Understanding all of these personally makes it easier to comprehend where children are coming from, hence, coming up with more ways to connect with them and making ourselves accessible to them as true educators. Arts education and learning leans towards greater sophistication, in terms of where a particular subject brings the educational community, working with the children's interests. It is everybody's culture and not just the adults. Children are growing in confidence and engaged in a true sense. As an educator accommodating into practice listening and observing, the process of becoming in itself occurs and dominates my personal general practice in teaching. Every effort to understand children and their ways of thinking and behaving acts as a channel and within the process; becoming happens.

Conclusion

There is the continuous desire to work with children, to understand them and to support them. There is the excitement to learn and wonder with them, to ask questions and be curious like them. There is no end to this for the duration of this teaching journey. There is no end to this becoming, because children are always colourful and hopeful.

Children's interests are as varied as their experiences and run beyond their limitless imaginations. There are some things that just seem very regular but bring about great wonders to them. The project can start by asking them questions like: Where have you seen a rainbow; what makes a rainbow; or how are rainbows created? This discourse will hopefully spark their interests and stimulate them some more to explore the topic. These generated activities were inspired by the "Crowds" project (Filippini & Vecchi, 1996) and the "Creations" project (Lind, 2005). The use of different presentations of arts making, as justified by Forman and Fyfe (as cited in Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998) is that: "...we need to move children beyond the level of making symbols into the



level of inventing language and from the stance of using only the native spoken language to the use of many different symbol systems...It is the nature of the relation among the symbols that converts the medium into a message; and it is the presence of an intended message that motivates children to negotiate shared meanings and to co-construct knowledge” (p. 249).

This is not just all about exploring the arts; it is also about being able to negotiate shared meanings and to make sense out of things that allow children to create their own milieu. It is through these opportunities that children learn. Art is a ‘plane’ that children can easily relate to and helps educators to access a child’s world. Truly, the Deleuzo-Guattarian concepts were born out of numerous studies, countless discourses and very careful review of philosophy and psychology. Their work in relation to how children think, act, behave and express themselves provides justice to the practices undertaken by Reggio educators, in terms of seeing the arts as the medium to help children construct their own knowledge. Children’s ‘lines of flight’ can easily be gained through drawings, dance, music, clay, painting, etcetera, just to name a few. It is through these theories that we can now hold and build on the image of the child and give added sense and worth to the work we do.

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