A dialogue between the Reggio Emilia Experience and the IB Primary Years Programme

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Introduction

'Dialogue', as represented in the title, is used not as a conversation or debate between two people or two parties. Rather, the word 'dialogue' stemming from Greek origin (the word '*di*' to mean 'through' and '*logue*' to mean words) is used to highlight the concept that it is through words we communicate as a way to exchange ideas; not necessarily to agree with the other or to change the other person's point of view, but to come up with another idea or newfound understanding – '*not my idea, not your idea, but a new idea*' (KAREA Conference, 2008). It is in this notion and spirit of innovation and invention that I approach the relationship between the Reggio Emilia Experience (sometimes referred to as the Reggio Emilia Approach) and the International Baccalaureate (IB) Primary Years Programme (PYP) in the context of an early years programme for 3-5 years olds at Yokohama International School, Japan.

Thus this article does not aim to specifically outline the similarities and/or the differences between the Reggio Emilia Experience and the PYP, nor the 'marrying' of the two, but rather aims to 'recreate' with others the meaning and our understanding of early childhood education by interpreting, translating and understanding the principles of the Reggio Emilia Experience and of the PYP in depth. I coin the term 'recreate' with others, not simply to create, but 'to create and to create again' giving importance to an ongoing construction of new ideas with freedom and creativity, which become shared ideas in the context of one's own learning and teaching environment.

Defining the context: the Early Learning Centre at Yokohama International School

The term 'international school' is varied in its meaning in different educational institutions. In this article, the term is used in the context of a 'traditional' international school catering for children of globally-mobile expatriates (Hayden, 2011) with reference to Yokohama International School (YIS), a school founded in 1924 by members of the foreign community in Yokohama, Japan, to serve the educational needs of expatriate children and using English as the medium of instruction.

The Early Learning Centre (ELC), comprising two levels with children from ages three to five, was formed in the fall of 1998, separating from the five to six year-olds who subsequently joined the elementary section of the school. For 40 years they had been together under the umbrella of 'kindergarten'. This shift was brought about due to demographic changes within the school that led to the relocation of the three to five year-olds off campus. Change can often cause tension among constituents due to uncertainty, not knowing what the changes will bring, treading into unknown territories. However, in actual fact this physical separation from the main campus prompted and initiated a conceptual freedom to reflect on our early childhood education practices and beliefs, and laid the foundations for our present curriculum where we incorporate the principles of the Reggio Emilia Experience within the curricular framework of the PYP.

Our 'dialogue' between the Reggio Emilia Experience and the PYP began in 2000 after I (as Director of the ELC) had the opportunity to participate in a study tour in Reggio Emilia. Whilst the PYP offered a framework for the ELC to challenge our approach, moving away from thematic approaches to concept-driven inquiries, the Reggio philosophy helped us enter into a learning process of deconstructing and co-constructing our own knowledge, values and identity, not only for the early years department, but also of ourselves. We now enter into our 12th year of this ever evolving 'dialogue', with a continuous flow of a transient body of teaching staff, children and families, all members working collaboratively as active participants constructing pages of our story at the ELC, with a goal to create an amiable place of education and to continue enriching our work with the youngest members of the learning community at YIS.

The Reggio Emilia Experience – the concept of the 'Hundred Languages' of children in an international school context

Reggio Emilia, a city in northern Italy in the province of Emiglia Romana, is a prosperous, industrial and progressive city, embedded in history, which over the last few years has become ethnically diverse, creating 'a new Reggio' (Piccinini, 2004). The philosophy of the Reggio Emilia Experience is not a commercial one as an exportable product. 'Reggio schools' can only be found in Reggio Emilia, and schools outside of Reggio Emilia that embrace its philosophy are best referred to as 'Reggio inspired' schools. Often the question 'how do you do Reggio?' is asked, or 'we want to see it in action' is requested. There is no answer to the way 'to do' Reggio or 'to see it in action', simply because the Reggio Emilia Experience is not a method or model that can be taught, but rather must be embraced and understood as 'a way of thinking about children, schools, education and life' (Rinaldi, 1997). I believe there is a need to interpret and translate the philosophy into one's own educational and learning context *in*

depth, not in isolation but together with colleagues and the community. Recently in attending a PYP early years workshop, I was delighted to find the ideals and beliefs from Reggio included, though with the danger of incorporating the principles on a surface level, out of context and possibility for misinterpretation.

The poem *No way. The hundred is there* written by the founder, philosopher and guide of the Reggio Emilia Experience, offers an entry into understanding his philosophy that portrays the image of the young child as possessing strength, potential and full of resources. I believe it is a powerful message and metaphor, and a declaration that gives value to all the symbolic languages (graphic) and poetic languages (of music and dance) (Giudici, 2010), which children possess, and not only to the verbal language that education can seem to stress.

No way. The hundred is there
by Loris Malaguzzi (translated by Lella Gandini)

The child
is made of one hundred.
The child has
a hundred languages,
a hundred hands
a hundred thoughts
a hundred ways of thinking
of playing, of speaking
(For the complete poem go to:
www.reggiokids.com/about/hundred_languages.php)

In an international school such as ours, one class can be composed of children from 14 or more nationalities from different hemispheres of the world, with diverse cultural backgrounds; children whose mother tongue may not necessarily be English. In such an environment, the concept of the 'hundred languages of children' can offer the possibility to interpret the children's thinking, learning and understanding with more flexibility. Innate in all human beings is the wish to communicate with others and, equally, the expectation and right of being listened to. The concept of the 'hundred languages of children' offers the space for all children to express themselves and to be listened to, not only through the limitations of two languages – namely, the verbal and mathematical languages – but through many expressive languages, and the concept brings out, and equally gives value to, the strengths and thinking of each child. In the minds of young children, have we ever stopped to think, for example, when we the adults utter a word such as 'cookie' or 'biscuit', how this single word can evoke many images and sensory experiences for the young child, and especially for children from so

many varying cultural backgrounds and experiences? One cannot assume one uniform cultural image, as simple as it may seem – a chocolate chip cookie, a shortbread biscuit, two pieces sandwiched with cream or jam or marshmallow, round or square in shape, sweet or not so sweet, soft or hard, sugary or plain, out of reach in a jar (or a box) or always available in a basket, *etc*. And how could so many varying images be best expressed and communicated without words? The metaphor of 'the hundred languages' helps to steer us away from banal, stereotypical and standardized adult images and understandings of objects and thinking and, instead, offers a lens to view and '*to listen to*' a world of possibilities, perspectives and expressions within the young child, suspending our judgments and our prejudices.

Giving significance to student learning, the PYP writes of its commitment to a *transdisciplinary model*, that is, 'themes of global significance that transcend the confines of the traditional subject areas frame the learning' (IB, 2009, p6). Furthermore, a set of transdisciplinary skills are outlined to be incorporated not only into the units of inquiry, but also in principle to teaching and learning within the classroom and beyond. Reggio writes of their way of thinking as '*interdisciplinary*' (Rinaldi, 2001), and extends the PYP concept of transdisciplinarity through the metaphor of 'the hundred languages' to offer the possibilities and pathways for how the disciplines interconnect and interweave; not viewing them in isolation, but seeing them as belonging together and enhancing each other, how science and art (aesthetics) can dance together and inform each other. Vea Vecchi, in her book *Art and Creativity in Reggio Emilia*, writes of aesthetics to mean being sensitive to the patterns that connect, being sensitive to all elements around us to understand the micro to the macro, and giving importance and need to establishing a deep, intense, and empathetic relation with 'things'. Never have these words become more alive than during my one-week study with Reggio educators in the summer of July 2011, in the mountains of Ligonchio, Reggio Emilia. In this environment and space, together with 100 educators from 20 different countries, I became totally immersed in the experience of 'being a child', free of adult consciousness, researching into such scientific concepts as the energy of water, magnetic forces or botany through feeling, hearing, tasting, speaking and seeing with all my senses the beauty and loveliness of being in harmony with the science and art of nature. I was situated in a space where the mind was not separated from the body, how a child enters into new situations, intuitively knowing and encountering scientific phenomena and beauty with curiosity and enjoyment. I am deeply aware even as I write these words that one can read them with 'the mind' but perhaps not fully understand them until one has the possibility to experience the 'written words' with emotion and action.

At the YIS ELC in our work with children, we encounter more than 100 languages, perhaps. However, it may be useful to invoke the metaphor in conversation about our educational endeavours to enhance our understandings about what literacy, in the broadest sense, means in the Reggio experience. The underpinning methodology does not privilege a certain language over another. Rather, it treats all modes of communication equally. This does not mean that academic literacy, for instance, is relegated and that we treat the language of light or colors, for example, with more focused attention and esteem. We might say that a Reggio pedagogue shifts into and out of different spaces of communicative strategies and events with the children, frequently with striking contrast. In this way, also, we are alternating stimulation and heightening sensitivity for languages and disciplines through transposing literacies of diverse derivations, such as the language of colors, or the language of science.

The Primary Years Programme – why is imagination not included in the IB learner profile?

In the foreword to *The Grammar of Fantasy* (Rodari, 1996) Herbert Kohl asks: 'What is the place of imagination in education?' And further suggests, according to poet Wallace Stevens, that if imagination is the power of the mind over the possibilities of things 'then to neglect or miss out on imagination is also to impoverish children's worlds and to narrow their hopes' (p.ix). In the context of an international school and of the global world, and in consideration of a curriculum that aims for students to acquire and develop an 'international-minded' (IB, 2009, p2) perspective toward learning and life, then I question why '*imagination*' does not appear in the attributes of the IB learner profile. I believe imagination can act, and is needed, as the unifying element of activities to bring all attributes of the learner profile together, heightening our conscious awareness of each profile, giving value to the processes that the attributes can sustain. I wonder if perhaps, at this moment, it may be important to consider the *image of the child* – one that is strong, capable, and full of resources and potential – as the Reggio educators believe and as our ELC also believes, rather than a focus on aspirations for building upon a list of profiles.

The IB clearly is conscious of the learner profile as being value-laden and supports these values as embodied in international education. Reggio has challenged our thinking at the YIS ELC in encouraging us to view school as a place of education where values are discussed, constructed and transmitted (Rinaldi, 2001), where we view the young child no longer as 'consumer' of culture and values, but as creator and producer of values and culture together with the adults; an educational vision that is close to Paolo Freire's (1970, 1993) vision of adult education that is cooperative, compassionate and egalitarian.

With the IB learner profile as a framework, and with reference to the Reggio writings on values, we first began to listen and to observe the children's daily interaction at school and, by sharing these observations with the parents and discussing them, we unpacked what those values may be, and what we give value to. Thus we shared the Reggio's attention to values such as the value of participation, the value of difference, the value of fun, the value of learning, the value of democracy, and the value of caring, and co-constructed additional values such as the value given to responsibility and respect.

In our daily interactions with the children we are fortunate and delighted to experience and observe both the physical and conceptual spaces of explorations on the attributes of the IB learner profile. We have also learned to perceive the list as a whole, and not as something to be taken separately one at a time for, in reality, this whole is a reflection of the discovery of self, which weaves threads of meaning into the life of the child. With imagination at the forefront of our thinking, rather than asking what is the meaning of the IB learner profile, we have reframed the question to ask: What meaning do the children give and bring to the adults on the attributes listed in the IB learner profile?

Embarking on a PYP unit of inquiry as a year long unit has additionally helped our ELC to construct the meaning of the learner profile with and through the children in depth, looking at the profile from many perspectives, and through many 'languages'. Imagination helps us to view the list from many perspectives and from not only one viewpoint. As an analogy I use the example of how we also encourage our children to look at things from many viewpoints and angles, such as drawing a building from the top, from the side, from the back, and not only to view always from 'the front', appreciating each individual's interpretations and experiences.

A curricular framework for Early Childhood Education – programmed or progressive?

If we can interpret and incorporate the meaning of imagination into our daily interactions with the children, then perhaps we can begin to think of possibilities to reflect on curricular frameworks. The PYP offers a comprehensive curricular framework that is concept-driven and inquiry-based. Keeping imagination alive in mind, as I am informed that imagination is not just a faculty separate from the mind (Rodari, 1996) but is the mind itself in its entirety, the ways in which we approach inquiries and construct concepts have the possibility to take paths that are not as direct, confined, and programmed. In *The Origins of Thinking in the Child*, Henri Wallon writes that thought is formed in pairs, where the concept of 'soft', for example, cannot be formed before or after the concept of 'hard', but both are formed simultaneously in an encounter that is the offspring, where the

fundamental element of thought is a binary structure, not the single elements that compose it. How then can an international student begin to understand the cultures of others without knowing and understanding his or her own culture, in the same way that we might ask how can the concept of light be interpreted and understood without experiencing the sensations and explorations of darkness?

Traditional curriculum development has been committed to organized goals, measurable objectives, and mastery evaluation to achieve a specified educational outcome (Slattery, 1995). More recently, however, there has been a change of focus, challenging the field to focus on internal experiences rather than external objectives. The meaning of curriculum is derived from the Latin verb *currere*, which means 'to run the racecourse' and therefore I feel it is better to be looked at as a verb, an activity and, more rightly so, an inward journey. In the Reggio literature, one often comes across the word 'projects', which the children undertake or embark on as a journey of research to explore certain phenomena. I feel this concept needs to be clarified to understand how Reggio educators utilize the meaning of projects, also not as a noun but as a verb, stemming from the Italian word *progettazione*, which connotes a meaning of projection or 'to project', which, although there may be intentions set out by the teachers and children, has the possibility of being modified and negotiated along the inward journey of knowing, learning and understanding and giving importance and visibility to this process.

Collaboration, construction, communication

Collaboration in the context of school occurs on many levels between people of differing backgrounds and roles, such as between the children, between the teachers, between the children and teachers, between the teachers and parents, between the teachers and administration; the list goes on. In a school environment we often speak or write of a 'collaborative climate' to mean a supportive group of people working together, and we seem to understand the theory of collaboration. However, the practice of collaboration on a conceptual level does not seem as simple.

One of the most profound ways in which the YIS ELC has understood the meaning of collaboration, construction and communication has been our experience and work on pedagogical documentation as the Reggio educators define this methodology. Pedagogical documentation is 'interpreted and used for its value as a tool for recalling; that is, as a possibility for reflection' (Rinaldi, 2001, p78). The learning path that takes place in school, and which pedagogical documentation can inform, assumes the full meaning of the experiences of the children and adults. Through documentation, the educational path becomes concretely visible, as in the way the materials are gathered during

the experience (such as videos, photos, graphic images and the like), but these materials as data are read and interpreted at the end, distributed across time. Understanding this didactic itinerary encompasses the understanding of collaboration, construction and communication because of the need to reflect, reconstruct, interpret and reinterpret with others – which provides authentically the salient moments of the path that made it possible for the objectives of the experience to be reached. We have learned that it is in this space that the questions, the dialogue and the comparison of ideas are situated, and help guide us to take the next possible steps and decide what to give value to.

It is in this space that we give meaning to the definition of collaboration, construction and communication, that we recognise that one teacher is not the sole owner of the experience and sometimes needs to 'let go' of personal interests, as these experiences need to be discussed, and interpreted in the spirit, and value, of democracy. In our work with young children, I find that they are not as possessive of their ideas as are adults, but rather rejoice in others adding to their ideas. At the YIS ELC, the concept of '*listening*' or the '*pedagogy of listening*' (Rinaldi, 2006) is much discussed, how listening requires sensitivity towards not only listening with our ears, but also with the heart, with our eyes, and I have thought much about this concept by posing questions. How does listening become a natural habit for young children? We expect the children to listen to us, assuming that we, as teachers, know how '*to listen*'. Does the culture of school invoke listening in ways that are respectful and reflective to all participants in the learning community?

Each observation we make is subjective, but through documenting the observations and sharing them with others, the process involves and naturally calls for collaboration, construction and communication, whereby the subjective observations and interpretations shift towards inter-subjectivity involving interpersonal and intrapersonal reflections, moving closer to the thoughts and learning paths of the children in a way which least betrays the children's thinking. Pedagogical documentation has helped us provide the basis of communicative effectiveness and didactic effectiveness because of its nature of visibility, legibility and shareability.

Moving towards a new idea

Herbert Kohl, in *The Grammar of Fantasy* (1996, p.ix), writes:

> 'The possibilities of things' – the counterfactual world of supposings and imaginings – make it possible for children to stretch themselves beyond their everyday realities and confront experience with the question 'What if?'

Our dialogue between the Reggio Emilia Experience and PYP has opened a forum to discuss the possibilities of things, not only with the children, but also amongst the adults. In our daily work with young children, I have learned that children – with their plasticity of the mind – whilst acknowledging their own idea also delight in others joining in with their ideas to come up with new ideas that then become shared ideas, constantly exchanging in dialogue and asking, 'what if?' A child comments: "We could have our assembly outside." Another child adds: "But *what if* it rains?" Then another child chimes in: "Then we can hold our umbrellas." Just one example of the multitude of ideas the children share with imagination. I have also learned that the more I study in depth, the more I realise how little I know and how ignorant I am. The more we study in depth the Reggio Emilia Experience and the PYP with and through the children, the more questions we have, based upon more diverse and richer interpretations and perceptions, basing our questions on our direct work with the children. I view dialogue not as a teaching technique, but as a principle to uncover theories and assumptions as a way of better understanding our practices and of reformulating the questions and perspectives from which we work by attempting to make connections between theoretical formulations and practice. I view educational institutions as places for reasoning together on education; places where ideas can be exchanged, so they can evolve, be exchanged together with others and contribute to building new ideas.

The PYP talks of a transdisciplinary model and Reggio of an interdisciplinary approach, introducing elements of a varying nature that require the adults to be capable of embracing them and amplifying them. I believe young children naturally possess an interdisciplinary approach to learning and building knowledge, and I feel there is an importance in realising the need to move and *to listen* more closely to the ways of the children, rather than the reverse of asking the children to come closer to the adults.

This article opens up a dialogue in the context of early years education for creating exchange, a dialogue between the Reggio Emilia Experience and the PYP to be reciprocally enriched. Though complex, such exchange and dialogue contribute to a richness of knowledge and cultures for the advocacy of young children.

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