

Boxes in my Closet

Reflections on a trip to Reggio Emilia

Melissa Tonachel May, 2007

Being in Reggio Emilia required a constant sorting out of philosophy and practice, beauty and realism, inspiration and overwhelm—not to separate them, but to find the places where, back in my kindergarten classroom, in Brookline, Massachusetts (United States), they might continue to intersect, play back and forth, and find realization. I am struck by so many words and images, all of them provocations toward improving my teaching by becoming a more willing learner. The experience was perfectly timed, coming at a moment when I am challenging my own methods, trying things in new ways, listening more and talking more with the children. My experience in Reggio Emilia, then, was unique (like each person's was, as much as we shared it) because it was informed by the experiences I'd recently been having in my own classroom, particularly by experiments in letting tip the balance of control between adults and children and letting waver the presumed boundaries between us.

Like many teachers, I have boxes in my closet (in many closets) full of materials corresponding to particular units of study. These materials are brought out in the season when it is determined that we will study this topic and put away when the study is completed. The boxes are full of the best materials, and the worst. Each year for many years I have wondered what it would be like to begin in September with no specific curriculum planned. It's a daring proposition in the face of district learning expectations and state standards. And there are the interns I am mentoring who mostly look for a method for getting through those first years of teaching on their own. Each September comes up again too quickly, and instead of following with the children the squirrels who populate our playground, I go to my curriculum boxes and we are looking at trees again—pressing cider, contemplating the changing color of leaves, making observational drawings and reading stories that communicate why trees are important to people. I've got my box of very worthy activities that respond to all the skills children are supposed to be developing and which promote my own value of getting children in touch with the environment. Now I wonder, how am I to presume upon children's connection to their world? Why am I asking this question—"What do you know about trees?"—rather than "What are trees?" If I asked this question, I imagine we would look at trees in ways I cannot now predict. And if we followed the squirrels, what stories might we invent? How would trees figure in them? What would we come to understand, appreciate, imagine and communicate about trees, squirrels, seasons, resourcefulness, and each other? Despite the questions begging to be asked, there are those boxes, begging to be opened, their annual ritual. Are the boxes really more compelling than the children's questions?

There must be intention behind every question I ask, behind the environment I offer, behind the materials I make available. The intention must be to learn alongside the

children and, as the adult, to provide not activities but provocations. The best materials are not tucked away in a labeled box, but are the materials that might be used for any study; for these are materials full of possibility. There don't need to be so many of them, either. We have this idea in American schools that all classrooms must have the same materials and that there must be both wide variety and ample supply. But I have observed over time that the children in my classroom, despite my efforts at training, move too quickly from one set of materials to the next and don't always care for the tools and materials they have.

I watched two five year old children at Scuola Diana prepare to paint at the easel. They moved together and with intention through the acts of donning smocks, selecting paper and arranging it on the easel, then choosing brushes and, finally, pots of paint in just the right colors. They chatted, they took their time, they helped one another. They considered their subject: a vase of wisteria set atop the easel; they ran to stand under the great archway of wisteria blooming around the side of the school building. And then they painted purposefully, carefully, (beautifully!) for an hour and a half, continuing to revise their choices for colors and brushes, to negotiate materials between them and discuss artistic decisions. They assigned their work the importance it commanded.

So many activities in our classrooms—and this coming from a teacher who has long been known to put her own spin on required tasks—are formulaic, decided in full before they even begin. Their end point is known, their process well understood. Pedagogista Tiziana Filipini visited my classroom a couple of months ago, and I am reminded again and again of her remarks about the activities laid out before a child: it is not that this activity has no merit, but that a child is robbed of the possibility of finding her own expression when we limit her means of communication. I am conscious these days of looking for the twists and turns any process might take, of adjusting my expectations as I watch and listen. Not to abandon all ideas about important experiences or understandings an American kindergartner might need to move into first grade, but not to prepare her explicitly for that next year, either. To allow both. To live in the space of dialogue with children and also with materials, environments, structures and time.

It was a great joy to discover that in the moments I was considering long-held and newer questions, jotting tirelessly in my notebook, I found revelations in the conversations with teachers, pedagogistas, atelieristas, and in the schools. What had been previously difficult to imagine became clear in the practice of the Reggio Emilia approach—for example, this one: How long are particular materials/activities available to children? And the answer I envision: as long as they are provocative, productive, engaging for the children. Since returning—barely more than a week—I find myself leaving tables open that previously held linear activities I expected every child to complete. I am playing games with the children more often, suggesting they choose a medium in which to represent their ideas, watching and listening longer before jumping in to help.

Another conversation with Tiziana comes back again and again—this time it was in Italy, a beautiful evening following a concert of flute and piano, spring in full bloom,

and a sweet privilege to play aloud with these thoughts with someone so full of clarity—she asked me, “So? What do you think?” It was the biggest question possible.

There must be a direct correlation between ownership and responsibility. That is, when children are offered shared ownership of their environment, materials, curriculum and schedule, their sense of responsibility must be enlarged. They must take charge of their learning in new ways when they are invited into the decision making process of how we will learn together in our community. (The word “ownership” feels not quite right here but I haven’t come up with a better one. It is not to imply a right of possession. It is rather something about the willingness to give up the control to which we teachers are accustomed, to share that control with children.) As Tiziana and I discussed, it isn’t a matter of handing everything over to the children. She said: the shared experience is not constant, but a constant back and forth between teacher and children.

It’s challenging to accept that kind of constant movement, when I have believed myself to be a teacher who knows what I am doing. But more than that, it is thrilling. To open my eyes and ears that much wider, to be responding to children with that much more authenticity, to feel that every endeavor is just that, an endeavor, not something prescribed or predictable, but full of possibility and excitement. Can I offer that feeling to the children? Can I hook them not with experiences I think they ought to have but with what they most desire to explore?

These two notions of rethinking ownership and embracing intention circle around and around each other. I am at once compelled to take more responsibility and to share it. These two inform my daily practice of being with young children and heighten my already lofty mission for education. Speaking in Reggio Emilia, Carlina Rinaldi brought me to tears because she said so poignantly and so led me to deeply understand what I have always said I believe about what education means: that “children teach us to wonder, to be surprised, to accept possibility; to continue to believe that we can be better, that democracy is possible, that peace is possible.”

I am not so worried about how transforming my teaching practice through this approach will look in the face of standards or district learning expectations. I know that in a trusting relationship with children we will accommodate each other, and they will sometimes perform tasks they are obliged to. There is room, too, for something entirely different, for the game of catch between us, teacher and children, and for the dance among children’s characters, discoveries, explorations, investigations. When I make room for listening so closely with them, won’t they also listen carefully with each other? Is this not how we learn, through acknowledging possibility?