

The move: Reggio Emilia-inspired teaching

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In the Rainbow District School Board, we have been refining our approach to Early Learning and inquiry learning in the primary grades for the past five years. Our work in Early Learning is primarily inspired by the preschools of Reggio Emilia, a city in Northern Italy about the same size as the city we live in. The preschools in Reggio Emilia gained international recognition for being the best in the world, beginning in 1991 when they were cited in Newsweek magazine as one of the "best top ten schools in the world." They have consistently won awards and recognition since. For 70 years the Reggio educators have studied how young children learn, refining their theory of learning and teaching.

The Reggio Emilia perspective shifts the focus of the classroom away from the teacher and onto the students, viewing children as capable, self-reliant, intelligent, curious, and creative. This approach also treats the classroom as the 'third teacher', encouraging teachers to take a great deal of care in the creation and setup of the environment of the classroom and the materials that are introduced. Finally, this approach positions the teacher as a researcher, documenting the children's relationships and interactions with people, ideas and materials in the classroom.

In the Rainbow District School Board, our understanding of the Reggio Emilia approach is ever evolving. Each year we have decided on a new focus to help grow our understanding of the elements involved in this type of approach. Some things we have focused on in the past are: treating the outdoors as an extension of the classroom, using the arts as a vehicle for learning and teaching, documentation as assessment, the

building of community and exploring the concept of inquiry. What we discuss in this vignette is the experience of one of these inquiries in an Early Learning – Kindergarten classroom. Working on this inquiry were: Tara Thall, the classroom teacher, Emily Caruso Parnell, providing arts support, and Jeffrey Wood, researcher from Laurentian University. The students in Tara’s class were fascinated by movement, and specifically dance. As a result of the children’s interests and the researchers’ observations, dance became a focus of our work with the children in this inquiry.

A number of students in Tara’s class had a fascination with music so, very early in the year, to capitalize on this interest and the students’ desire for performance, Tara helped the students build a stage and gathered donated instruments. The children would sing, play the various instruments and move on stage. Within weeks these movements began to leave the stage area to the carpeted area used for whole class gatherings. The students started to create what they called “moves.” As the children worked on developing these ‘moves’ they began to share them at community time in the same way that other children were sharing art, writing, or structures they had built. The ‘moves’ of the children in Tara’s class became a language that they understood and readily used to communicate.



Figure 1 – “The move”

As researchers we recognized that the arts, as multimodal literate acts, are consistent with children’s somatic learning nature (dramatists, painters, performers, dancers, singers, percussionists and natural story tellers); as well, the arts tap the interconnected ways young children explore and understand the world. The arts enable children to express deep thinking and high-level meanings without words or print. While children in grades one and two are learning the to use the codes of reading, writing and numeracy, the arts provide other means of expressing their thinking, connections and

understandings, which may be more representative of what they know and can do than traditional literacies. Through the arts we were able to see the child as a competent learner and to better understand a literacy learning that is informal and visceral.

In the year this vignette took place Tara decided not to choose her own inquiry question in advance of the school year but instead to watch and listen to the children in her class and see what their interests were. She quickly noticed the children's interest in movement and musical performance. She became interested in the idea of movement and wondered about the children's attraction to this way of learning and expressing themselves. This interest was brought into laser focus when a grade one boy, who was visiting the class because he was not adjusting well to grade one, offhandedly remarked, "I love to move, I love to draw, I love to build." Tara immediately realized that his preferred ways of making meaning in the world were not being recognized in grade one and that was his point of struggle; it made her wonder about the rest of the class and the children's desire to move.



Figure 2 – "Flip" [name of the move]

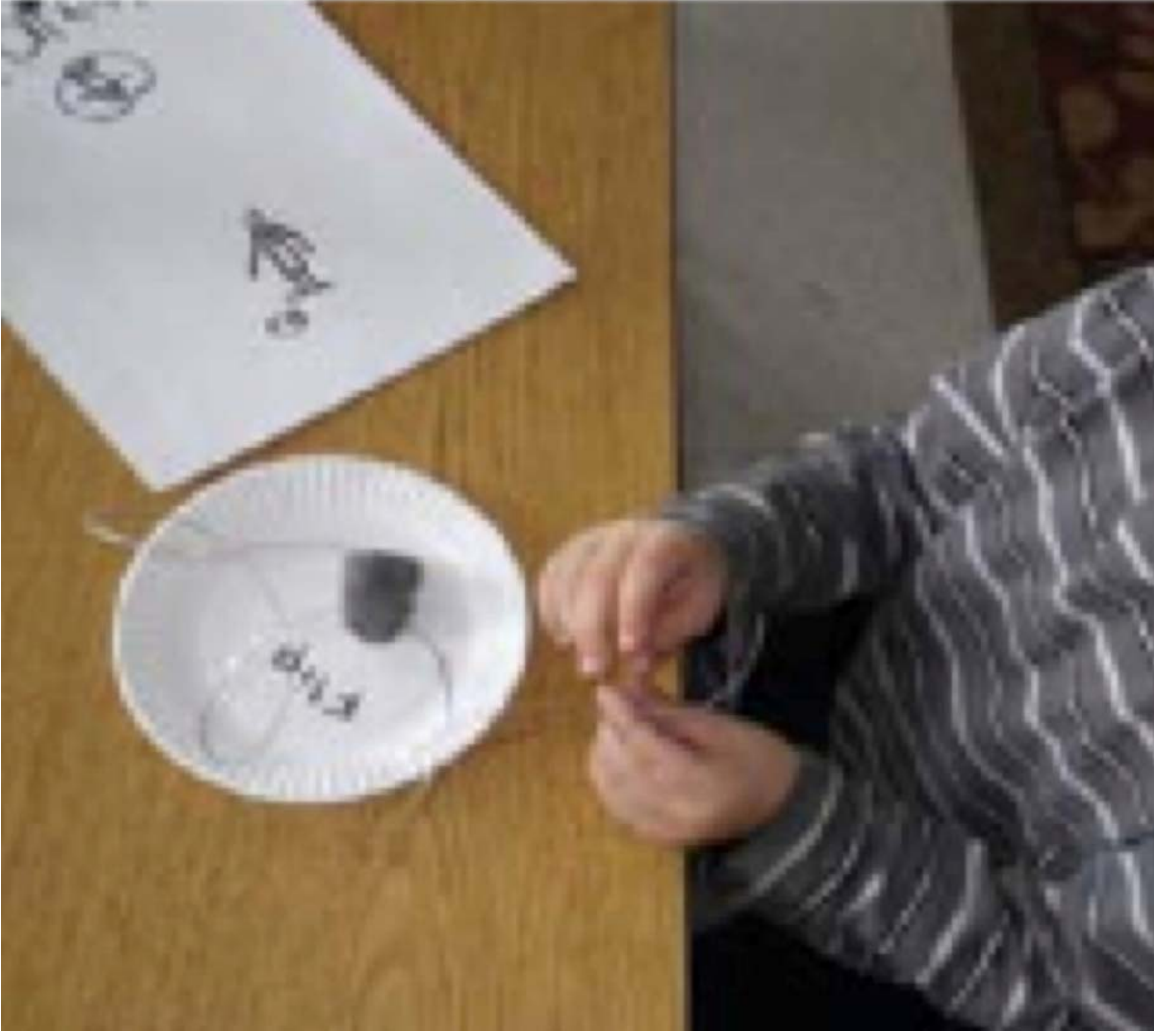


Figure 3 – “Flip” [as drawing and as wire art]

Children are fascinated with the way their bodies move; they make connections with themselves and the world around them through movement. Movement is a language children can use to express themselves without using words. The children in Tara’s class exuded confidence when they demonstrated how they moved.

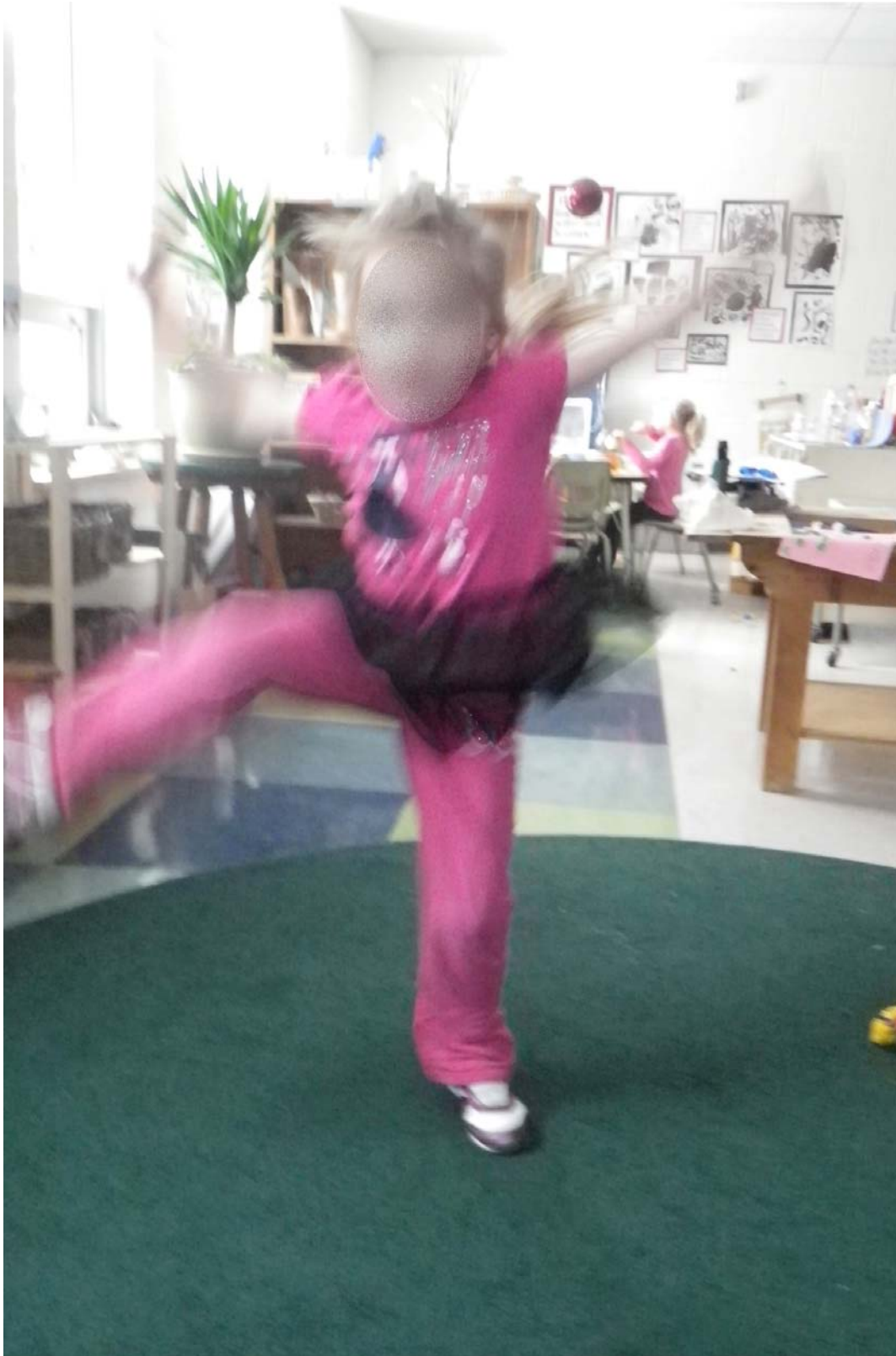


Figure 4 – “This [the name of the move] is a flower

As Tara focused her attention on the students' 'moves' and wondered about what the children were learning and expressing, the children also became more interested in this activity. It seems that when we open up a point of inquiry or wonder around the things that we do in the classroom the children themselves seem to pick this up as a point of entry into their own inquiries and a place of wonder. It is our playfulness as we wonder and question that invites the children to wonder themselves. But children's questions are always so much deeper and richer and so much more than we, with our limited linear ways of thinking, could possibly imagine.

Tara worked on ways to extend the children's interest in dance and introduced new materials into the classroom for the children to explore. She encouraged the children to draw and re-represent their 'moves' in different media. The children gained a better understanding of their bodies by representing their 'move' on paper. Further understanding of their body movement became evident when they were presented with wire as a material to explore with. The wire became a means in which to tell the story of movement. For some students, this study led to further exploration of movement and encouraged them to collaborate in creating multiple person 'moves'.

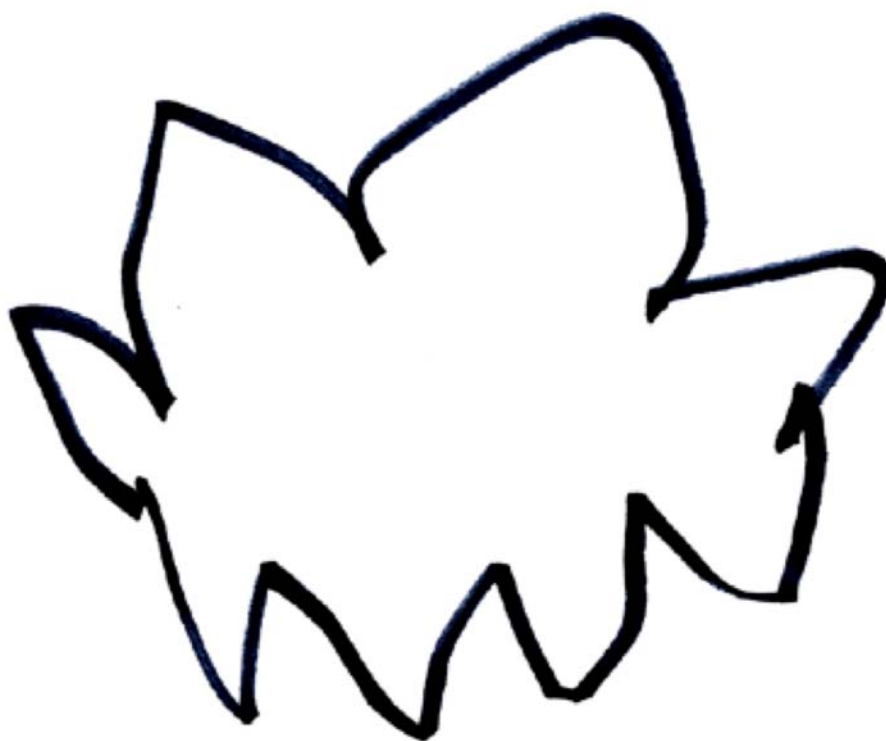


Figure 5 – Drawing of the move "Flower"

I like the wire. I was doing cartwheels and I was spinning. This is the cartwheels and I made curling, it's there [pointing at the page and the wire]; I was spinning. - Hope¹

¹ Please note that the names of any children used in this paper are pseudonyms

The music the children were singing, listening to and dancing to was mostly pop and children's music (Sharon, Lois & Bram, Raffi, etc.). This music interested many of the students, but not all. Trevor was one boy who seemed not to respond to this music. We assumed he was just not interested in doing 'moves.' While Jeffrey was documenting the children's 'moves', using his iPhone, Trevor asked if he had "Start Me Up [by the Rolling Stones]" on his playlist. He did not, but the next time he was in the classroom he brought the song with him. Trevor asked again and they played the music. Trevor and a group of other boys who had not been as interested in the 'move' inquiry project started to dance. The boys shared their 'moves' that day and engaged in the project as full participants.



Figure 6 – "Start me up"



Figure 7 – “The Tongue” [move to go with “Start me up”]

The children started to explore movement beyond the classroom and introduced it in places such as the gym and outdoors. They started to create obstacle courses with mats, chairs, and tables in the gym and classroom. The ‘move project’ then provoked a curiosity in the children about the human body. They wanted to know what made their bodies, how they moved and what gave them strength, and they did all sorts of interesting scientific investigations. As they created these obstacle courses the children started to explore concepts of pattern through movement and through the structures that they created for themselves. And so, to accomplish what was required of the obstacle courses, not only would the children have to move over and under and around various objects they would also have to do specific ‘moves’ as well. Other children explored patterns through movement and through music. They became curious and asked questions about bones, the brain, the heart and how the blood flows. The children excelled at showing us what they could do and what they knew; they were able to

quickly take the tools we were offering them for the arts and apply them to subjects such as mathematics, engineering, science, technology, and language.

When we use the arts in our classrooms as a vehicle for learning and teaching, students who are otherwise quiet and shy often come to life and become leaders in the classroom. In Tara's class we observed that students would defer to these students as experts of movement. The introduction of movement allowed otherwise silenced children, like Trevor, to find a voice. The arts also allowed the children access to other literacies such as math and writing, allowing them to scaffold their own learning across literacies and giving them a vehicle to express and share what they knew.

For Tara, as well as the other educators we worked with, this inquiry developed a deeper understanding of their own teaching practice, a deeper knowledge of the students in their classrooms, and a greater appreciation of the power of inquiry, pedagogical documentation, and the Reggio Emilia approach. Tara started to see pedagogical documentation as a form of advocacy for her students in schools where the children were only being seen through the narrow lens of curriculum expectations. Interestingly, the grade one and grade two teachers at the school started to see the children as literate and numerate individuals capable of great potential, and they no longer viewed the children from a deficit perspective [which was prevalent prior to the conducting of this research].

Tara appreciated the value of documentation as evidence of learning. She experimented with creating an audit trail to survey and track the larger themes being explored by the children in the class and to help her plan next steps in her teaching. In her documentation we saw the capable child reflected, along with a growing awareness of the individual learning story as well as the group narrative. Pedagogical documentation proved an effective form of assessment within the complexities of the Early Learning -Kindergarten classroom.

One of our greatest successes throughout this inquiry was the children's response to it. It was clear that the children wanted to participate because we spent so much time focusing on them as learners and thinking about them first. Throughout the inquiry process there were many opportunities for children to explore their interests through multiple entry points. Student engagement was never an issue.

The problem with this vignette is that it is so neat and simple, and it was anything but. This is the problem with story; we often brush over the complexity. We ignore all that went into this before and after. The year before this vignette took place Emily had conducted workshops on dance and the arts. Emily transformed a number of the classrooms in her school, as well as various other spaces, so that interested teachers could explore movement, visual arts and different materials, and through them the concept of creating meaning and understanding the world through the arts. It was Tara's exposure to these workshops that made it possible for her to see the 'moves' as valuable and gave her the tools to extend the children's learning. Tara had also done a number of inquiry projects in the past and had taught using a Reggio Emilia approach for several years prior to this project, giving her the confidence she needed to follow the interests of the children in her classroom. Another thing that is lost in this vignette is the sense of

time; it lasted nearly the whole school year, as children entered in and out of this inquiry project. The children seem to pick up and put down the ideas in this project and move on, only to revisit and extend their thinking a few weeks later. Also lost is the fact that there were other inquiry projects going on at the same time in Tara's class with children who had different interests. And, finally, it doesn't address the day-to-day complexities found in every classroom such as the diverse needs and interests of young children and school board expectations. But it is these complex interactions that make this type of teaching so rewarding.

Each of the teachers involved in our inquiries has gained a deeper appreciation of the ability, curiosity, intelligence and self-reliance of children. They have learned to trust the children and to trust the environments they have created to support the children in their care. Each teacher/educator has delved more deeply into the Reggio Emilia inspired approach, gaining deeper understanding and a greater ability to listen to their students. The educators have constantly said that there is an ease about this type of teaching practice; one that comes from teaching in a way that resonates with the interests and desires of their students. The process of documenting children's learning led to a deeper understanding of that learning and to the practice of assessment for learning. Such a deep understanding of their students, and their interests and desires, has led to greater student achievement in each of these classrooms. Many students who would not normally have been able to cope at school have been able to find success in the classrooms of these teacher researchers. "I like where we are... a much deeper place than where we started."

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