

Re-igniting Fires: enhancing literacy learning by fostering imagination and creativity with Reggio Emilia inspired philosophy and practices

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

Creativity is a hot topic in education with calls to increase student creativity in our classrooms and schools (Yong Zhao 2012, Robinson, 2014). Much is made of how important it is, how we must foster it in our students, and how it is being neglected. Although critics are quick to identify the perceived loss of creativity in learning, little practical support has been provided to teachers about how to actually foster and enhance creativity and creative opportunities. I have had a long-standing interest in creativity from my years as a classroom teacher, teacher educator and adviser within a College of Education coupled with my current role as primary school principal. Over the years I have sought opportunities to develop my knowledge and understanding of ways to conceptualise learning in order to build on students' natural creativity- their curiosity, wonderment and awe. Richard Gerver in his book 'Creating Tomorrow's Schools Today' asked his staff at Grange Primary School how they were going to create a '*learning Disneyland*' (Gerver, 2012, p. 100), noting that schools should be '*exciting hubs of energy, life and wonder...*' (p. 101). Learning is such a natural part of children's lives; evidenced by how much they learn before they start school through play and experimentation. I am interested in how we can design a curriculum in primary schools that is truly student centred enabling learning for students to feel like play and exploration whilst deepening their understanding of the world and how it works.

Literacy provides a foundation for learning in a primary setting. New Zealand has a rich history of inspirational educators, teachers like Sylvia Ashton Warner and Elwyn Richardson who seamlessly wove literacy learning into rich and engaging programmes. In recent years there has been some concern about the narrowing of the curriculum due to the prioritizing of literacy and numeracy. However I believe as educators we have control over the ways in which literacy is conceived both in classrooms and wider school programmes. Fostering creativity, through integrating the arts, in order to support and enhance literacy learning was the primary focus of my inquiry. Initially I was particularly interested in the junior school around the Year 3 level as this tends to be when students are beginning to shift from primarily learning to read and write to utilising these skills to learn. I was interested in ways of using the arts and imagination to stimulate and re-ignite the energy, life and wonder of literacy learning.

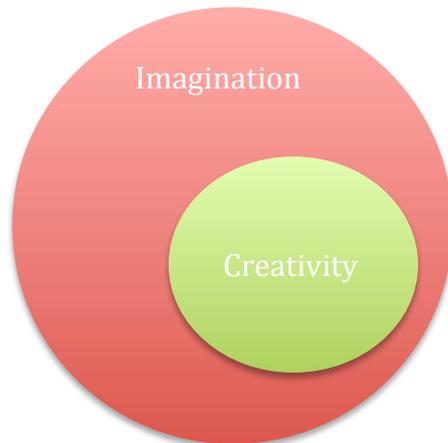
Examining the Literature

Firstly I needed to develop a clear understanding of the nature of creativity and the creative process. Kaufman and Beghetto (2013) describe four levels of creativity, which they call the Four C model of creativity. These are described in their article as follows:

- *“mini-c, or interpretive, creativity (such as a 2nd grade student's new insight about how to solve a math problem).*
- *little-c, or everyday, creativity (such as a 10th grade social studies class developing an original project that combines learning about a key historical event with gathering local histories from community elders).*

- *Pro-C, or expert, creativity (for example, the idea of the flipped classroom pioneered by teachers Aaron Sams and Jonathan Bergmann).*
- *Big-C, or legendary, creativity (for example, Maria Montessori's new approach to early childhood education)."* (Kaufman and Beghetto, 2013, p. 12-13)

The first 2 levels of creativity are those that we regularly engage in while the other two are of a more transformational, breakthrough type nature. Sir Ken Robinson (2014) defines creativity as a process that involves developing original ideas that have value and goes on to note that creativity involves putting your imagination to work, in a sense then, creativity is applied imagination (Robinson, 2014). Therefore without imagination there can be no creativity. The following diagram illustrates this relationship between imagination and creativity:



We can be imaginative without being creative, coming up with a raft of novel and/or divergent ideas but in order to be considered creative these ideas have to not only be useful or valuable to yourself or others, but also acted upon or realised. The notion of imagination as a precursor to, or foundation for, creativity led me to rethink the role and significance of imagination within my inquiry. Imagination is defined by Chandra Handra (2013, p. 2) as *'the ability to conjure new realities and possibilities'*, to see beyond the here and now to *'bring to mind things that are not present to our senses'* (Robinson, 2011, cited in Chandra Handra, 2013, p. 2).

Robert and Michele Root-Bernstein in their book 'Sparks of Genius: The Thirteen Thinking Tools of the World's Most Creative People' identify a useful range of integrative imaginative tools or strategies that support creative thinking with links to other recognised theories of learning such as Howard Gardiner's Multiple Intelligences, Blooms Taxonomy of Thinking and Wiggins and McTighe's Facets of Understanding. Similarly Egan in his Imaginative Education Research (<http://ierg.net/>) has identified a series of cognitive tools to engage students' imaginations in learning. These cognitive tools appear to connect with the Root-Bernstein thinking tools perhaps providing a means or technique for supporting or facilitating the thinking tool.

Root-Bernstein Thinking Tools	Imaginative Education (IE) Cognitive Tools
Imaging (imagining with all of the senses, visualising) Observing (intense sensory awareness)	Affective mental imagery Abstract binary oppositions
Playing Body (kinaesthetic) thinking Dimensional (spatial) thinking Modelling	Games, drama and play
Abstracting Creating analogies	Joking and Humour Metaphor
Transforming Synthesizing Empathising	Narratizing and personalizing Story Form Puzzles and a sense of mystery
Recognising and forming patterns	Rhyme, rhythm and pattern

These tools may provide a useful planning frame for teachers when considering ways to enhance opportunities for imaginative thinking in order to foster the imaginations of their students.

Imagination and creativity are clearly not restricted to the arts, however the arts, as fundamental forms of human expression and communication, may provide a vehicle for fostering and enriching them within other areas (Eisner, 2008). In fact, Merryn Dunmill (2010, p. 3) says '*any effort to educate for creativity must place arts at the centre*'. Extensive global research indicates positive impact of the use of learning *through* the Arts on overall academic attainment, reduced school disaffection and the promotion of positive cognitive transfer (Bamford, 2006, cited in Das, S., Dewhurst, Y., Gray, D.). Moreover, Sir Ken Robinson (2007) states "...*raising reading and math scores means exciting and motivating students to want to do better in these things... It means engaging their passions and imaginations, not numbing their minds. This calls for a rich curriculum, not a honed-down one.*"

Since the Reggio Emilia approach foregrounds the arts it requires deeper investigation. The following principles and practices provide the foundation for this approach (Cadwell, 1997):

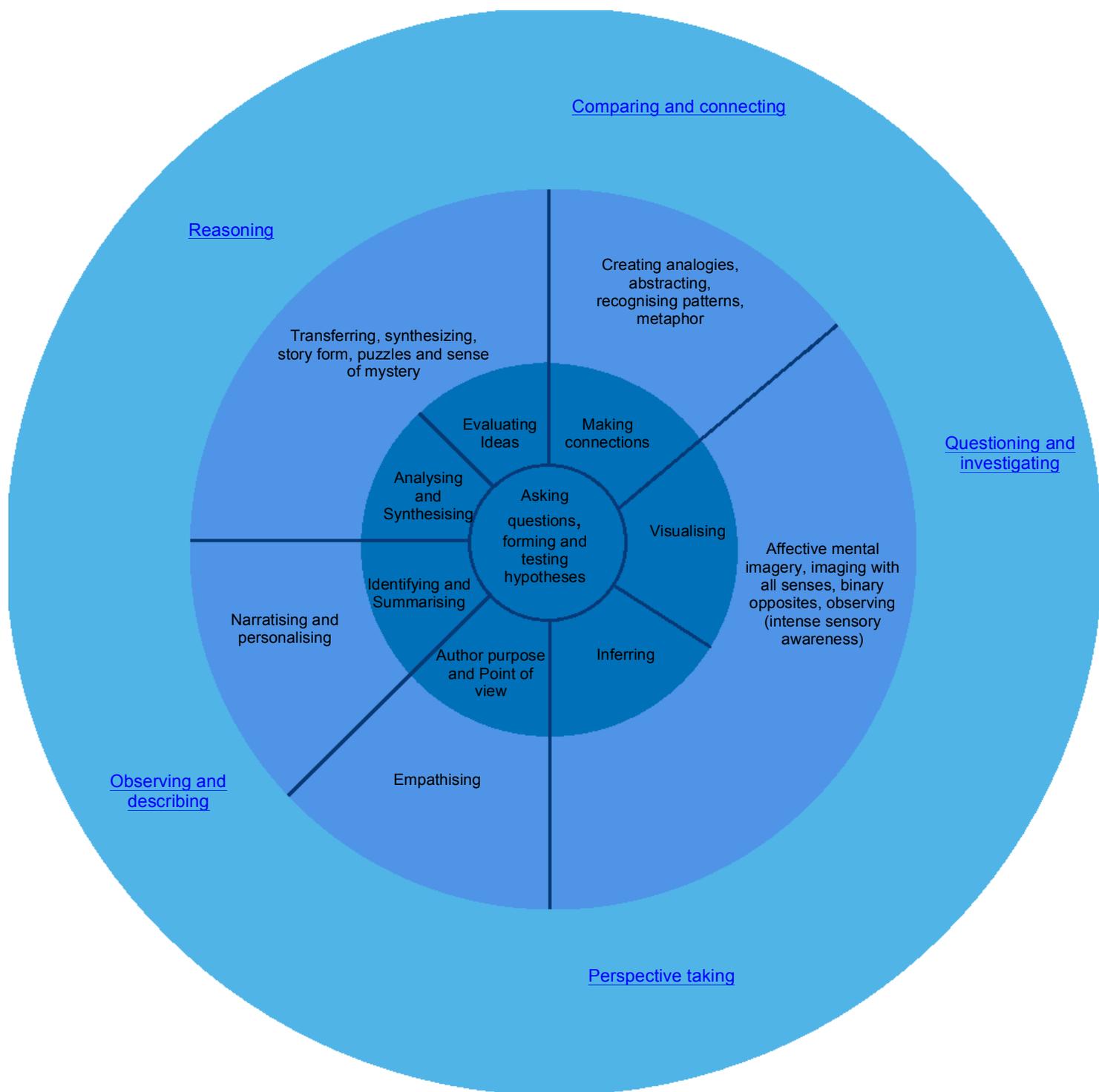
- **Children as researchers and active protagonists of their own learning-** *children are encouraged to play, explore, invent, question, collaborate and communicate with others as they pursue their own passions and interests. Learning is viewed as both an individual and a shared endeavour with children working on their own, in pairs and in small groups.*
- **The hundred languages of learning-** *children are encouraged to learn through painting, drawing, collage, clay, music, socio-dramatic play and construction, testing their theories and expressing new meanings through the '100 languages of children' (Malaguzzi 1998).*
- **Pedagogy of listening-** *teachers listen and observe children closely (listening with their eyes as well as their ears) using children's ideas as the focus for learning.*
- **Progettazione-** *responsive and flexible curriculum coupled with teaching as inquiry- learning is project based and these projects start either from events, ideas or problems posed by one or more children, or experiences (provocations) initiated by teachers. Teachers engage in continuous discussion and interpretation of their work and the work of children. Learning is carefully observed and documented. Work samples, photographs, transcripts of children's words and teachers notes are analysed and used to shape learning pathways.*
- **Environment** - *the environment is viewed as a teacher too and recognised for its potential to inspire and support learning.*

Conceptualising the inquiry

Attending a number of workshops and seminars based on the principles and practices of Reggio Emilia's early childhood learning led me to wonder about the potential and possibilities of elements of this approach for primary settings. This sabbatical provided me with a rich opportunity to explore the nexus between the philosophy of learning embedded in the arts focused Reggio Emilia approach and the fostering of imagination and creativity in literacy learning. Effective Literacy Practice in Years 1-4 (Ministry of Education, 2003) identifies a series of comprehension strategies for enhancing student understanding and critical awareness of texts:

These are: making connections, forming and testing hypotheses, asking questions, visualizing, inferring, identifying and summarizing, analysing and synthesizing, evaluating ideas and recognising author purpose and point of view.

Having explored Root-Bernstein's and Egan's tools for fostering students' imaginations I wondered about the connections of these with the previously mentioned comprehension strategies, central to literacy learning. The following diagram is an attempt to conceptualise the connections between these tools and the comprehension strategies. For the purposes of the diagram I have represented the comprehension strategies separately however, readers and writers use these strategies in a fluid and integrated manner. The outer circle of the diagram shows specific routines from the Harvard Project Zero Artful thinking website (<http://www.pzartfulthinking.org/routines.php>) that may be used to further support the thinking tools and strengthen the comprehension strategies.



In using the cognitive and thinking tools as part of the literacy planning process and programme and through incorporating the artful thinking routines, teachers can further embed the key strategies that support and foster the development of imagination and creativity, namely that of:

- Visualisation
- 'Playing' with material and ideas
- Flexible 'what if' thinking
- Open-mindedness and multiple perspectives
- Connections and associations

Working in this way also aligns with the principles and practices of the Reggio Emilia approach, as it provides a means of supporting the development of imagination and creativity.

The cognitive and thinking tools coupled with the Artful Thinking Routines provide practical strategies for promoting close looking and noticing- observing with all senses, playing with ideas, thinking flexibly and considering multiple perspectives as well as supporting connections. Exploring texts through these tools and strategies within a Reggio-inspired programme may not only deepen student

understanding and appreciation of literature but may also provide opportunities for students to experience 'little c' creativity (Kaufman and Beghetto, 2013).

What does this mean for our school?

Firstly we need to consider how the underlying principles of the Reggio Emilia philosophy are reflected in our classrooms and learning programmes. This includes reviewing our ideas and beliefs about the image of the child and the image of the teacher.

The following questions highlight key considerations for discussion and reflection:

- What does 'children as researchers' and 'teachers as researchers' mean in our classrooms and school?
- To what extent do our learning programmes reflect the wonderings, interests, discoveries and emerging theories of our students and how is literacy embedded in this?
- How visible is learning within our classrooms and wider school programme to our students and other teachers and whanau?
- How do we record and communicate why students are engaged in particular learning, what the learning is and what the next steps are? How well are students able to articulate this in relation to their learning (Hattie, accessed online <http://visible-learning.org/2014/05/john-hattie-video-festival-of-education-new-zealand/>)
 - *Where am I going?* (What are my goals, what am I working on improving/learning?)
 - *How am I going?* - (What progress am I making, how do I know?)
 - *Where to next?* (What do I need to focus on now, what else can I do to keep progressing or practice my learning?)
- To what extent are we using our pedagogical content knowledge coupled with in depth knowledge of our learners to use the curriculum as the guide it is intended to be?
- What do we, as teachers, understand by listening with all our body and senses?
- To what extent are we using our environment, experiences, artifacts and/or cognitive tools as sparks or provocations to tweak curiosity and foster learning within literacy and across the curriculum?
- How are we eliciting, fostering and utilizing our students' imaginations within our literacy learning and beyond?

Where to next?

As a school we will continue our journey of trying to create a learning wonderland for our students (Gerver, 2014) where the arts infuse our literacy learning and where we work to nurture and sustain students' natural curiosity about, and enthusiasm for, the world around them.

Specifically we shall revisit our beliefs, ideas and practices in relation to:

- Students as active decision-makers and researchers and the subsequent negotiated, dynamic curriculum- what does this mean for teachers and students- the who, what, when and how of programme planning and organisation;
- Consideration of the hundred languages along with the cognitive tools, and the integration and use of digital technologies, as means for students to express understandings and communicate ideas and theories;
- Space for students- space in terms of considerations both within the environment and the programme, time for students to imagine, ponder, think, question, and create, taking increased responsibility for their own learning;
- Pathways or entry into literacy using the arts or inquiring, and responding to, with and through literacy as it authentically emerges;
- And finally, the selection and use of texts in our classes.

As is the case with any inquiry, the more I have learnt, the more questions I have and the more I realise there is still to learn.

The essence of this Reggio Emilia inspired approach is perhaps best captured in the following poem entitled 'If...' written by Pamela Houk and accessed at <http://bsherry.wordpress.com/thinking-about-learning-2/reggio-emilia/>

If I can
ask my own questions,
try out my ideas,
experience what's around
me, and share what I find;

If I have
plenty of time for
my special pace,
a nourishing space,
things to transform;

If you'll be
my patient friend,
trusted guide,
fellow investigator,
partner in learning;

Then I will
explore the world,
discover my voice,
and tell you what I know in a hundred languages.

Final Acknowledgement

I am extremely grateful for the opportunity this sabbatical afforded me to engage in focused professional learning involving reading, reflecting, and dialogue with other educators, in particular my interview with Vicki Nicolson, Principal of Port Chalmers School in Dunedin who has undertaken the Reggio Emilia Study Tour and our visit to Rolleston School in Christchurch, where the curriculum design is inspired by the principles of early childhood learning from Reggio Emilia. Carrying out this investigation has provided an opportunity to develop my understanding of ways to foster opportunities for the development of imagination and creativity and further strengthen the meaningful integration of the arts in our literacy programmes in the junior school and beyond.

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