

The RE(D) Framework: A constructivist tool for reflection about early childhood visual arts pedagogy. Dr. Gai Lindsay

Children have the right to express and make meaning using visual arts materials and to access and fully participate in cultural and artistic life (UNCRC, Article 31).

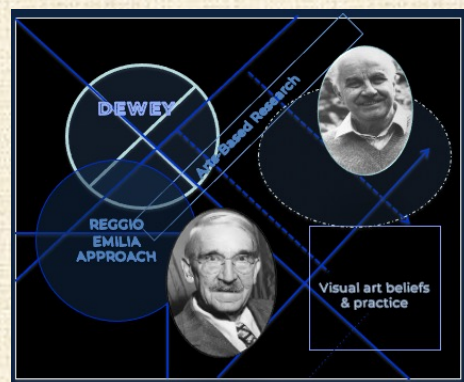
The foundations of children's capacity to effectively communicate and make meaning through visual arts are established in early childhood (EYLF, 2009, p. 38).

THE ISSUES MY RESEARCH AIMS TO ADDRESS :

- Although early childhood services are ideal settings for early arts engagement through play-based curricula (Eisner, 2002), there remains little clear guidance for educators regarding the skills, beliefs and practices that support pedagogy and no consensus on the knowledge and skills required to teach the arts (Andrews, 2004).
- Curriculum documents provide little specific curricular guidance (Krieg, 2011).
- Personal beliefs and knowledge about art-making may foster a negative pedagogical cycle, whereby the visual arts curriculum educators experienced as children is replicated to disconnect a new generation from their right to access visual languages (Garvis, Twigg, & Pendergast, 2011).
- Children frequently experience what Eisner (2002) referred to as the null curriculum; significant for the absence of quality visual arts learning experiences as much as for the provision of learning experiences that lack depth and intentionality.
- if early childhood educators lack the confidence, skills, and visual arts knowledge required to effectively support children's visual arts learning and engagement, it is possible that children's learning in the visual arts domain may be restricted (Lindsay, 2015) and contribute to an ongoing cycle of unexamined practice.

Revisiting John Dewey to move toward progressive visual arts pedagogy

As a long-term student of the Reggio Emilia approach, my familiarity with their application of visual arts practices supported my understanding and perception of visual art beliefs, pedagogy and practice in early childhood contexts. However, because the educators in Reggio Emilia do not consider their work to be a theory or a model to be imitated, it was necessary to analyse the ideas of theorists who have powerfully informed their research and practice. John Dewey was selected as he is broadly acknowledged as a major influence on their foundational philosophy and practice.



"The influence of John Dewey...is visible in contemporary early childhood classrooms of Reggio Emilia" (Dodd-Nufrio, 2011).

"I am happy that this great educational philosopher is still alive and well in Italy" (Hawkins in Edwards, Gandini & Forman 2012).

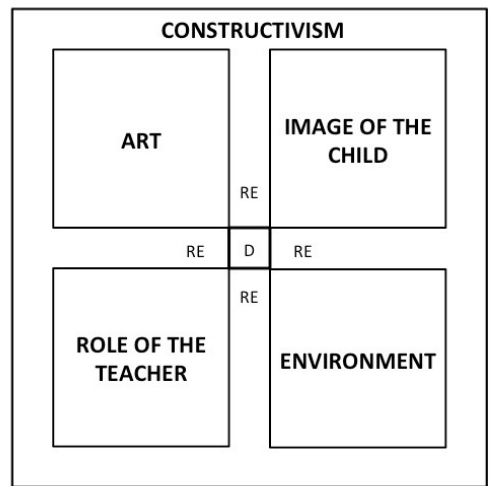
Dewey's theories of democracy, education and art powerfully influenced the foundational philosophy and educational practice in Reggio Emilia (Cooper 2012, in Edwards, Gandini & Forman 2012).

"Dewey's texts have become one of the cultural models of reference determining the innovation of Italian pedagogy" (Burza, 2009).

Developed to inform my research design and data analysis processes, my research developed a constructivist conceptual framework informed by John Dewey's established philosophical ideas about democracy, education and art and the key philosophical and pedagogical tenets of the Italian Reggio Emilia approach. This conceptual framework, presented as the RE(D) Framework resulted from the analytical synthesis of the educational philosophy and pedagogy exemplified in Reggio Emilia (referred to as RE) and Dewey's work (referred to as D). To consider whether Dewey's educational principles would furnish the theoretical weight to justify a Reggio Emilian inspired conceptual framework, a comprehensive review of Dewey's writings about art, education and democracy was undertaken, along with a review of literature about Dewey's contribution to the theory of education. The analysis of primary sources by Dewey included: 'My Pedagogic Creed' (Dewey, 1897), 'The Child and the Curriculum' (Dewey, 1902), 'How We Think' (Dewey, 1910), 'The School and Society' (Dewey, 1915), 'Democracy and Education' (Dewey, 1916), 'The Psychology of Drawing' (Dewey, 1919), "Art as Experience" (Dewey, 1934) and 'Experience and Education' (Dewey, 1938).

Parallel to the analysis of Dewey's work, a full review of the literature about the Reggio Emilia was undertaken, along with a review of the researcher's personal conference notes developed during 2008 and 2012 international conferences in Reggio Emilia, Italy. This analysis revealed significant philosophical, constructivist, socio-political and historic alignment between John Dewey's philosophies of democracy, education and art with the philosophy and visual arts praxis of the Reggio Emilia approach (Lindsay, 2015, 2016).

My work highlighted threads of Deweyan influence upon the formation of the Reggio Emilia educational project and identified several of Malaguzzi's Deweyan inspired educational colleagues (Lindsay, 2015). Additionally, my research suggests that Malaguzzi's conception of the atelier as a place for art focused, hands-on collaborative research with children may have been inspired by John Dewey's (1900) discussions about art laboratories as a unifying force for democratic and transformative education (Lindsay, 2016).



The aligned philosophical principles of the RE(D) conceptual framework provoke reflection about:

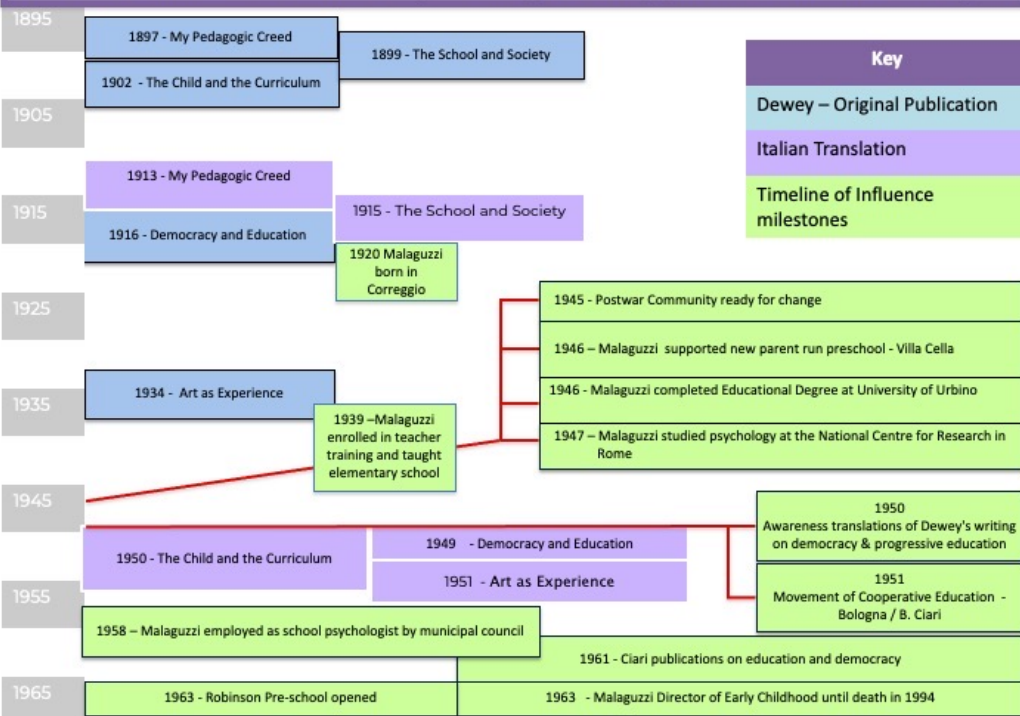
- Children as active and capable learners who have the right to speak with many languages;
- The provision of environment and materials as evidence of service culture;
- The role of the educator as artist, researcher and teacher; and,
- The place of visual arts in the curriculum as a tool for collaboration and meaning making.

Please contact me via the link below if you cannot access the following articles via online repositories.

Lindsay, G. (2015). Reflections in the Mirror of Reggio Emilia's Soul: John Dewey's Foundational Influence on Pedagogy in the Italian Educational Project. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 43(6), 447-457.

Lindsay, G. (2016). John Dewey and Reggio Emilia: worlds apart - one vision. *Australian Art Education*, 37(1), 21-37.

Timeline of Influence: John Dewey - Malaguzzi – Reggio Emilia Educational Project



Deweyan influence on the work of Italian reformers Lamberto Borghi, Ernesto Codignola, Loris Malaguzzi and Bruno Ciari and on the developing Reggio Emilia project.



VISUAL ARTS PEDAGOGY AS POLITICAL ADVOCACY

In the wake of World-War II, Malaguzzi advocated for children, as citizens with rights, to experience high quality early childhood education regardless of their social background. Malaguzzi utilised visual arts processes to make children visible in the community and to garner municipal support for community-led early childhood services as an act of social transformation.

Dewey was the voice in Malaguzzi's ear (Lindsay, 2015, 2016). Dewey's progressive advocacy for children's right to experience a rich, holistic education was a rebellion against an educational context driven by the aims of the industrial revolution; where children's rights were being subsumed by political agendas. Dewey also identified art (occupations) as the ultimate means of instruction. In his ideal school, hands on occupation through the arts was placed at the centre of a curriculum designed to inspire children's interest and engagement.

ART: "The incomparable means of instruction." (Dewey, 1934, p347)



Dewey

Reggio Emilia

Art is a language that expresses ideas in unique ways (Dewey 1934.)

Art is a graphic/symbolic language for making meaning / 100 languages.

Concept of classroom studios (laboratories) for artwork (Dewey 1899.)

Well equipped atelier and mini-ateliers (places of research through art) in all schools and classrooms.

Specialist subject teachers with expert skills and knowledge. (Dewey 1899.)

Specialist art teacher (atelierista) in all schools.

Use of real materials and skills (occupations.)

Extensive range of high-quality art materials / Direct teaching of skills and techniques.

"Dewey identified that children's learning occurs through interaction with materials, people and the environment (1939). He positioned art-making as a context for research in which children would engage in an active cycle of experimentation, knowledge and skill development, akin to the scientific research undertaken in laboratories (Dewey, 1939)." –excerpt from Lindsay (2016).

“Dewey conceptually designated areas of the floor plan as “studios for art work, both the graphic and auditory arts (1900, p.85, see Diagram 1), emphasising that “the graphic and auditory arts, represent the culmination, the idealization, the highest point of refinement of all the work carried on” (1900, p.86). In addition to laboratories for art and music, Dewey described a central room as “the place where the children bring the experiences, the problems, the questions, the particular facts which they have found and discuss them, so that new light may be thrown upon them, particularly new light from the experience of others” (1900, p.85).” –excerpt from Lindsay (2016).

The role of the teacher/educator:

Dewey (1902, p.31) believed that environmental provisions and art methods alone would not be transformative unless a knowledgeable teacher collaborated with children to both “determine the environment” and influence the direction their learning could take.

Dewey positioned the teacher/educator as:

- a collaborator, researcher and co-learner in partnership with children
- leader and facilitator of child-initiated co-operative projects of children’s experiences through intelligent awareness of the capacities, needs, and past experiences of the children
- Responsible to utilise pedagogical insight and subject knowledge to interpret the child’s activity, design learning environments and facilitate planned and spontaneous experiences in support of children’s learning, engagement and growth. - see Lindsay (2016) for full references and citation of the above.

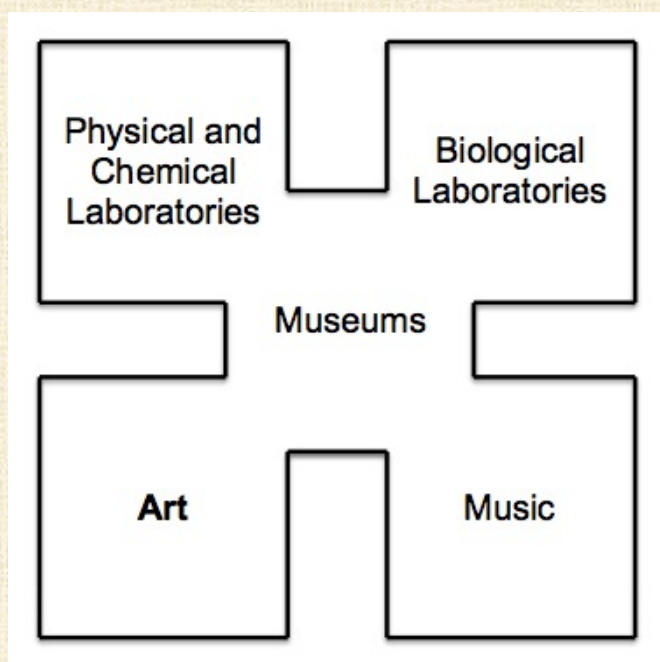


Diagram 1: Chart IV – The School and Society (Dewey, 1900, p.87).

When a teacher appreciates and gives direction to a child’s “interest in conversation or communication; in inquiry, or finding out things; in making things, or construction; and in artistic expression” (1900, p.47) Dewey said they **“keep alive the sacred spark of wonder”** and **“protect the spirit of inquiry”** (1910, p.30). Indeed, he likened the teacher’s selection of appropriate materials, methods and social relationships to **foster the “attitude of the artist” in children as the ‘art’ of teaching** (Dewey, 1910, p. 204). - –excerpt from Lindsay (2016).

“Dewey’s progressive democratic ideals located within the reflective interpretation of his work by Italian reformers Borghi, Codignola, Ciari, Malaguzzi, and educators in the Reggio Emilia educational project, offers inspiration to contemporary educators in early childhood contexts. Like their historic counterparts, modern children still have the right to access quality early childhood education and care where progressive activism is fostered. The identification of Dewey’s ongoing legacy in a current exemplar of high-quality educational practice challenges educators to consider their own pedagogical ideas and values while providing a focus for reflection about their current and future pedagogy.” – Excerpt from Lindsay, (2016)

Summary of RE(D) Synthesis

ART as Experience:

- Art as play and experience
- Art as a language
- Art for making meaning
- Art methods and techniques

"And so, the expressive impulse of the children, the art instinct, grows out of the communicating and construction instincts. It is their refinement and full manifestation. Make the construction adequate, make it full, free, and flexible, give it a social motive, something to tell, and you have a work of art" (Dewey, 1915, p. 44).

"Putting ideas into the form of graphic representation allows the children to understand that their actions can communicate.... In our view, graphic representations can be a tool of communication much simpler and clearer than words" (Malaguzzi, interview in Gandini, 2012, p. 66).

Image of the child:

- Democratic participation
- Rights of the child as citizen
- Children are capable, active protagonists of their own learning
- Value for the preschool years
- Children learn through active and hands-on experiences
- Children learn through interest-focussed learning projects
- Children learn through cognitive conflict and problem solving
- Children learn through social collaboration and co-construction of knowledge

"The child is the starting point, the center, and the end. His development, his growth, is the ideal... Literally we must take our stand with the child and our departure from him. It is he and not the subject-matter which determines both quality and quantity of learning" (Dewey, 1902, p. 9).

"This is the right of ALL children... It's necessary that we believe that the child is very intelligent, that the child is strong and beautiful and has very ambitious desires and requests. This is the image of the child that we need to hold" (Malaguzzi, 1993, p. 5).

Environment and

Materials:

- The environment as a resource
- Relationships with materials
- The environment reflects the beliefs and knowledge of the educator

"It is not enough that certain materials and methods have proved effective with other individuals at other times. There must be a reason for thinking that they will function in generating an experience that has educative quality with particular individuals at a particular time" (Dewey, 1938, p. 45).

"Of course, materials are of great importance. The more materials the children have, the better... Discovering the laws within the material means that to discover materials leads to a long process of discovery" (Malaguzzi, translated & cited in Moekstrup & Eskesen, 2004, p. 18).

Role of the teacher / educator

Role of the educator as Artist: Design environments that demonstrate aesthetic sensitivity and to develop the '100 languages'

Role of the educator as Researcher: Make children's learning visible and co-constructor with children

Role of the educator as Teacher: Develop a responsive curriculum that adapts content to children's interests / Engage in meaningful experiences (that build on prior experience and lead to growth) / Guide, extend, provoke and propose / Teach skills, model techniques and lend assistance

A personal reflection:

I admit to feeling somewhat nervous about how my proposal would be received. Would purist devotees of the Reggio Emilia approach be offended at my suggestion that many core values of praxis in the project are firmly grounded in Dewey's educational and aesthetic ideals?

Would highlighting the role played by Malaguzzi's contemporaries, including Bruno Ciari and Lamberto Borghi, with whom Malaguzzi debated and interpreted Deweyan philosophy (Lindsay, 2015) be considered an attempt to undermine the posthumous pedestal upon which Malaguzzi has been placed in many hearts and minds?

Perhaps for some this may be the case.

However, my examination of the socio-political reception of Dewey's work in Italy and the significant alignment between John Dewey's ideas with practice in Reggio Emilia has not in any way undermined my appreciation of the core values that underpin pedagogy in Reggio Emilia project.

Rather this re-cognition of Dewey's ideas, as interpreted in Reggio Emilia, has heightened my appreciation of the layers of history, collaboration and collegial debate necessary in any educational context that seeks reformation.

I hope that my work offers an entry point by which to consider your own visual arts curriculum and pedagogical choices.

Please do contact me at glindsay@uow.edu.au should you require any further information.

Warm Regards,

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Lindsay. G. (2012)
Reggio Emilia.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

- How might ECEC settings be transformed if the visual arts were positioned as a tool for advocacy and political change?
- How might an educator's image of the child drive pedagogical decisions in the visual arts domain?
- How can consideration of children's rights as citizens improve the quality of the arts materials, environments and processes they are offered?
- How can practice change if teachers/educators position themselves art/ographically as Artists. Researchers and Teachers?
- What should tertiary education settings do to disrupt students' low visual arts self-efficacy and extend Pedagogical Content Knowledge ?
- How can tertiary settings advocate for increased time for arts-based constructivist content?

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