



Designing for Children

- With focus on 'Play + Learn'

To Tell A Story

How Can Small Voices Make Themselves Heard?

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Abstract :

This academic year, I am studying the potential of non-linguistic forms of communication such as art, music, and movement to challenge educational and social inequalities by empowering underprivileged populations. Working as teacher, tutor, or caretaker, I have consistently used creative forms of expression as the most effective way to engage with children. Shifting to India has enriched my curriculum, designed as a series of collaborative projects modeled after the educational philosophies of Reggio Emilia and Nai Talim. Experiential projects give students who find themselves floundering in conventional lessons an opportunity to utilize their talents, and the process of choosing itself is an ideal forum to practice setting goals, research, organization, and presentation skills. Setting out to play with a purpose, we are trying to express local, truthful, and personal realities to captivate a potentially global audience.

Key words: *communication skills, storytelling, Reggio Emilia, Nai Talim, arts*

1 Why? : An Introduction to the Questions

It could be that I love stories too much. I love myths and legends, novels and picture books, the lives of people I meet and the latest experiences of friends. I am from the United States, living in India for nine months on a Fulbright-Nehru research grant in the field of education. I am investigating existing ideas and programs while implementing an arts-based curriculum intended to build confidence and skills for underprivileged student populations. Large group sizes and individual characteristics - varying levels of literacy, enthusiasm, inhibitions, trust, and volume - make any single means of expression inadequate for promoting equal opportunities in most childcare situations. Diversifying expression may attenuate these inequalities.

I traveled to India with ideas constructed around Waldorf, Montessori, and Reggio Emilia, the European models for alternative childhood education best known in North America and those I have observed in practice. I admire the care, beauty, and freedoms nurtured in practicing institutions, but expenses in materials and tuition keep many families from

choosing one of these alternative systems. While working at a government-funded primary school in San Francisco with many Latino students learning English as a second language, I based a typical lesson plan around art projects using recycled materials to encourage innovative thinking and instill an awareness of waste issues. The enthusiastic responses I observed, even among students who rarely participated otherwise, crystallized a conviction that broader access to non-conventional methods of education is both rewarding and possible.

Of these European philosophies, I chose Reggio Emilia as the starting point for the curriculum I envisioned because of three particular emphases : first, non-linguistic methods of communication are valued and encouraged; second, teachers and students are considered as partners in research; third, learning is structured around active work on experiential projects, where art is considered “central to the educational process as a form of both exploration and expression” (New, 1990).

1.1 Languages Without Words

My research centers on a home for about seventy children called the Sphoorti Foundation, located on the outskirts of Hyderabad and focused on successful integration of each child into urban society. To access nutrition, health care, safety, and education that would otherwise be out of reach, students come to live at Sphoorti from their native villages and towns throughout Andhra Pradesh. Expectations for their academic performance and future occupations are high, and English study is emphasized because of its practical value as a marketable skill.

As a native speaker of English, I am personally a member of a privileged minority that is able to convey a message simultaneously to my home community and to world powers in politics or economics. My intention is to share that privilege. Rather than enforcing study of a foreign language, I am interested in discovering how self-expression can bypass the boundaries of a single language. For example, the Sphoorti Foundation cares for children from Andhra Pradesh, yet its funding comes from an international network of donors responding to skillful communication of their story and their mission. Significantly, this communication does not begin with any rhetoric or written requests. The Foundation simply welcomes visitors to learn about their work through direct experience, and those visitors translate the story into words of many languages.

The potential for even very young children to participate in multi-faceted communication is amply demonstrated in “The 100 Languages of Children” exhibit, a compilation of projects and experiments created by the preschool students of Reggio Emilia. It has been touring internationally since 1987 and includes working musical instruments, drawings and paintings, multimedia documentation, and a plethora of stories (Reggio, 2008). Italian toddlers’ ideas are ably and vividly conveyed to audiences who do not understand a single word of Italian. This capability is the powerful lure of non-linguistic forms of expression, because the potential to access any desired audience is a first step to being heard on a global platform. I am investigating equal opportunity storytelling as a vehicle towards equality in skills and resources.

1.2 Teaching to Learn

It is not an accident that I am depending on my small students to teach me so many big life skills - speaking, eating, dancing, and singing in local style have all been topics of instruction. I am emphasizing an exchange rather than an imposition of knowledge to affirm the worth and talents the students already possess and can draw on to surmount future obstacles. Every student arrives with a story, with something to teach, and every teacher has something to learn. Within the framework of Reggio Emilia, teachers and students are conceptualized as partners in a research process (Stremmel, 2007), and the children at Sphoorti are the most enthusiastic researchers I've ever collaborated with. From the first project we began together they have been utterly willing to puzzle out whatever I ask, and when they realize that the assignment relates to a picture in their school books, or a map tucked into a corner of their room, they literally run to collect the material.



1 A student references a series of resources for help completing a mask-making project

Upon beginning research in India, I discovered an unexpected proponent of the idea that teachers must learn with and from their students : Mahatma Gandhi. His philosophy for universal and experiential education, Nai Talim, quickly joined Reggio Emilia in guiding the course of my research. There are great similarities between the two, and many of the significant differences clarify important exclusions in the other.

1.3 Crafting to Teach

Nai Talim is controversially based on the proposal that education be structured around mastery of a practical craft and schools should entirely support themselves by selling the goods that students create. The craft - famously spinning and weaving - should serve as a lens to explore conventional classroom topics : history and social studies of its practice, the sciences behind growing and dyeing cotton, the mathematical calculation of resources consumed and produced, the economics of marketing. Gandhi explained that “Education should appear to the child like play. Play is an essential part of education” (1932). Linking conventional topics to an enjoyable craft would ideally circumvent the odious memorization that often characterizes school.

The concept of learning through doing is also integral to Reggio Emilia, as students are encouraged to explore, experiment, and make mistakes with the materials at their disposal. The importance of the product is minimal compared to the significance of the process; “Projects provide the narrative and structure to the children’s and teacher’s learning experiences. They are based on the strong conviction that learning by doing is of great importance...” (Gandini, 2008). Learning to conceive, research, organize, and complete a project sharpens skills which provide confidence and competence for a range

of career choices. This, rather than selling crafts, will benefit the children at the Sphoorti Foundation.

2 When? : Adaptations for the Present

A common thread amongst these theories for alternative childhood education is their inception as a response to a specific historical moment; although often acknowledged in discussions on the topic, context deserves a more focused analysis. (Coulter, 1991). For example, the first group of post-basic students in Gandhi's care, galvanized by health concerns, engaged in intensive DDT-spraying to help control a 1947 outbreak of malaria. A few years later the students were working in a hospital and DDT was recognized as a human and environmental catastrophe (Sykes, 1988); still motivated by human health, the same students should fight against its use. On a broader scale, if the practice of Reggio Emilia and Nai Talim does not adjust to challenge new patterns of violence and oppression, they forfeit the basic passions that originally defined them.

Reggio Emilia and Nai Talim are both based on traditions of cooperation that are longstanding part of their respective cultures. "In the region of Emilia Romagna, where the city of Reggio Emilia is located, there is a long history and tradition of cooperative work done in all areas of the economy and organization... the phenomenon of people getting together and opening the schools, and teachers and parents working together to run the preschools now is consistent with established tradition..." (Gandini, 2007). Nai Talim has been interpreted as historical *gurukul* education adapted to support Gandhi's *satyagraha* movement (Patel, 2002). As well as modeling educational styles, therefore, these theories intrinsically demonstrate adaptation to contemporary circumstances.

Students face the challenges of a constantly developing present and deserve support in that specific reality. Their lives will be altered, if they have not been already, by the epidemics of the modern world : diseases such HIV/AIDS and malaria, contaminated water and malnutrition, natural disasters precipitated by climate change. Children have the right and the responsibility to effect change "as citizens of the present, not citizens of the future... educational settings [should] reflect children's rights as competent, participatory citizens" (Smith, 2008). In Andhra Pradesh this October, floods washed away swaths of homes, crops, and lives, ripping through a region that is home to a number of the students at the Sphoorti Foundation. Providing the students with a crucial pattern of responsible citizenship, the management of Sphoorti responded by donating available school supplies and raising funds to send rice to affected families.

3 Where? : Mapping Relationships

Nai Talim and Reggio Emilia both declare the importance of relationships as the essence of a school and among its most valuable societal contributions; according to Loris Malaguzzi, the founder of Reggio Emilia, "...we consider relationship to be the fundamental, organizing strategy of our educational system... The strength of this view of education is in expanding the forms and functions of relationship and interaction" (Allen, 2007 & Fraser, 2001). Working with a group of students who are separated from traditional familial ties only underscores the importance of relationships; these children must take additional measures to connect with the individuals and community around them.

To explore the contexts and relationships of these children's lives, I began the curriculum this year with a unit about map making. We are in school, in a specific town or city, a state, a country, and the world, and we are joined in at least one of these contexts by anyone we want to work, learn, communicate, or even fight with. So, as a stranger to the community and the country of my students, I showed up with supplies and asked for maps. Paper, pencils, crayons, fabric, magazines, glue, origami, and Q-tips became the world, India, Andhra Pradesh, and the school campus. Using few words, we were able to discuss what students came from similar areas and which were far removed, what they liked about those places and where they are now, how I had come to India and where I spent my time before.



2 Two students discuss favorite memories of their native place

The final activity of the unit was a treasure hunt planned and created by the students. The clues were big maps of the campus collaged from the projects of the previous weeks, and we prepared simultaneous treasure hunts for the boys and girls to allow everyone to participate. Small planning committees from each group decided for the other where to hide four “clues” and two prizes, and what the prizes should be. The enthusiasm and care taken by each group in creating something for their brothers and sisters at the children's home was an expressive testimony to the value of their recently forged relationships.

4 What? : Education rooted in traditions

The affectionate children living at Sphoorti naturally create and enjoy new relationships, but connections with their cultural history that are conventionally learned through a family structure must be purposefully addressed. My own severely limited knowledge about the traditions of Andhra Pradesh would make posturing as a teacher of the culture into a mockery. However, my position as a researcher places me in an ideal situation to collaborate with the children, exploring these traditions and learning about them together. Projects about art forms and celebratory occasions allow us to substantially explore local tradition.

To learn about the art forms of Andhra Pradesh we can look at samples of *ikkat* weaving from Pochampally and experiment with the basics by painting string in repeating patterns

and hand-weaving it into a small cloth. We can marvel at the skill of much-welcomed visitors who are trained in *Kuchipudi* dance, and then practice a few steps ourselves every time someone launches a dance party before dinner. The specific crafts proposed for Nai Talim, such as weaving, papermaking, and bookbinding (Patel, 2002), provide excellent occasions to discuss both traditional practices and contemporary environmental concerns.

The best example I can give for the educational potential of festival days is a scene from Diwali, while I was hiding away from the overpowering noise and smoke of firecrackers with a small group of girls in the pantry room. Laughing at ourselves and interrupted with cameo appearances by other revelers, they told me the meaning of Diwali with such movement, apposite use of props, and enthusiasm that it can only be described as a theatrical dance performance. Through active engagement with local traditions, students explore their personal identities and maintain a sense of belonging.

5 Who? : Documentation

Documentation is an important aspect of educational processes, particularly those which are art-based, yet I gave little thought to the purpose behind snapping photographs or jotting down observations before coming to India. The documentation strategies of Reggio Emilia, demonstrated in “The 100 Languages of Children” exhibit and many others, are often taken as a model for art educators and are now assuming a major role in my research. “The works become a contribution to the field of arts inquiry beyond the individual classroom. Inquiry-based documentation invites teacher and artist partners into an ongoing exploration of their practice... Documentation helps others see what the work looks like; it validates the learning that occurs and provides visual and aural images for thinking processes” (Burnaford, 2007).

Exploring the Reggio Emilia concept of documentation, the children at Sphoorti are engaged in an ongoing project of self-portraiture to create an unconventional student directory offering insight into their opinions and personalities. Drawings of themselves for this project show favorite uses for different parts of their bodies, such as lips singing or talking, a nose pointing out a flower to smell, and the legs pedaling a bicycle. Photographs capture actions like skipping and running or poses with props like cricket bats, carrom boards, and (just once) a convenient motorcycle.



3 A student who never poses for photographs makes an exception to help a smaller boy present his self-portrait

When I pull out a camera or a sheet of questions, there is an immediate shift in how students engage with a project. Some students continue unperturbed, some retreat to a more hidden area, and others leap into activity as subjects or co-documenters. The first time I distributed a questionnaire, students began enthusiastically writing or drawing their answers as well as helping their peers to understand the questions, recording the answers of those who weren't comfortable writing in Telugu, practicing English by puzzling out the translated version I carried along, and organizing materials. It was a concrete demonstration of students as self-motivated researchers assuming responsibility to analyze a situation and act upon their perceptions.

6 Conclusion

The experiences and personalities of my first months working in India are already profoundly enriching my initial ideas about the potentials of an arts-based curriculum. Through my research into Reggio Emilia and Nai Talim, and my partnership with the Sphoorti Foundation, I hope my students realize a connection to the past through traditions, an ability to function responsibly and successfully in their future, and above all to honor their concerns, joys, and potential in the present with observation and exploration.

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