Overlooked curriculum:
Seeing everyday possibilities

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Alma Fleet and Janet Robertson

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Contents

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Alma is actively involved with early childhood professional development, both within Macquarie University and in the wider community. Previously she was Head of the Institute of Early Childhood. Recently she was recognised by the university for her 'outstanding contribution' to Community Outreach. Her work with Catherine Patterson has contributed to many opportunities for professional conversations in the early childhood field. She has studied the work of educators in Reggio Emilia and is interested in evolving their provocations in Australian contexts.

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Introduction

The stories that will be told here invite you to reconsider your role in children's services, to see yourself as a researcher, an analyst of interactions and a philosopher about the nature of teaching and learning. There are two authors sharing these ideas. Janet works as the twos and threes teacher at Mia-Mia. Alma teaches at the Institute of Early Childhood. The stories in first person are all told from Janet's experience. Through their friendship and collegiality, Alma and Janet re-live and muse about these stories, placing them in a framework of professional enquiry and reflective practice. These stories are about young children; the provocations emerging from the stories resonate for all of us working in the early childhood field.

The key element in these stories is that we are placing more attention on the child in interaction than on the child in isolation. We are recognising that investigation with others provides opportunities for the sharing of experience and ideas in ways that enable richer possibilities and the co-construction of knowledge, rather than being limited by the singular experience. As the Italian philosopher Malaguzzi (1996b) wrote, 'Interaction among children brings social, communicative, and cognitive aspects into play…leading to solutions that children working in isolation would not reach' (p.22).

This does not mean that we should ignore observations of individuals, or that time spent reading or thinking or pottering about alone is less valuable or important than time spent with others. These seemingly individual moments, however, include objects and ideas that interact with the child and are part of a social context, and can thus be viewed through a lens of social constructivism (Dalhberg, Moss & Pence, 1999). While these ideas are familiar to many of you, readers who are unfamiliar with them might gain an insight by thinking about the stories and discussion that follow.

The stories told show children as theory-builders and problem-solvers. Some may feel that these stories and their interpretations challenge traditional ways of thinking about young children, particularly how toddlers come to understand the world. Actions that can be seen as 'just playing' can be reinterpreted as demonstrating rich creative thinking, empathy and relationship building (Fleet & Robertson, 2002). Revaluing how children inform and enthuse each other in daily endeavours bears closer examination.

At first glance some of these ways of thinking may seem confusing. Nevertheless, there are benefits in

> '…"not knowing" and actually seeking uncertainty. There are many who will not pursue the tough questions…[it is worth emphasising] the significance of critical reflection as a means of empowering the individual and as a result, supporting more thoughtful interactions with children. [Consider] the significance of pondering and not knowing as a means of better knowing' (H. Conroy, 21 May 2004, personal communication).

Think and Chat boxes included in the following discussion are provided to encourage and support this professional reflection. You may wish to think about them on your own or discuss them with colleagues. We have also provided some suggested reading for those who wish to think more about these ideas.
So, first to a story about boxes.

The box: Getting out requires a theory

What is it about a box? Most early childhood centres have them: boxes for building, boxes for storing, boxes for climbing in. We do not often, however, see a large cardboard box as a site for toddler theory-making. We have, nevertheless, a story to tell about such a box which invites you to reconsider everyday events in a children's centre as sites for the co-construction of knowledge.

A large computer box caused a sensation in the middle of a very busy morning. Its arrival instantly stopped everything else as the children tried to figure out how to get inside. As the teacher, I could have put the box away for the next day and halted the momentum, but instead I went with the flow and watched as they tried to get in.

Nancy has no qualms and hops right in. She is a natural gymnast and prepares to get out; swinging her leg over the top with ease, then dropping quickly on the chair and recovering her balance, she is poised to go again. Andrew tries to get in, scaling the chair as Mei Mei suggests. He is daunted by the drop into the box and retreats.

Then Mei Mei invites George to get in, which he does with the help of the chair. Once in he tries to get out, swinging his leg up like Nancy. Now he encounters a problem, he can't get out. Andrew offers him a hand and he takes it, but he is still stuck inside. The children consider his predicament, and offer suggestions. 'Lollies', says Nancy, and they all pretend to give him lollies and he pretends to eat them.
He tries to get out again, but to no avail. 'Drinks', says Kate and we try a drink. I (Janet) wonder if they are following the theory that food makes you stronger. Still stuck. Mei Mei and Andrew decide to rescue George and climb in. The three have moments of fun, just to explore the space together and find out how they can fit.

Photos courtesy of Mia-Mia Institute of Early Childhood

Photos courtesy of Mia-Mia Institute of Early Childhood

In the next consideration of the problem, Mei Mei asks for a bit of string. I give her a small piece of string (quite literally string), but she shakes her head and extends her arms to indicate something bigger; I suggest rope and she nods. I find a short length of elastic rope and they fiddle about with it, tying each other's legs. Sharon uses a piece of ribbon and touches George's clothes, saying to her mother that she is catching them with a hook. Unfortunately, pretend fishing is not going to work. The time has passed, lunch is pressing and the rest of the group is ready for a song and game. As these experiences unfold, the three watch happily from the box, jumping about inside to the music.

Of course, if I had felt they were upset, I would have solved the problem for them immediately, but it seemed to me that they revelled in their box and wanted to stay in it, rather than thinking very hard of ways to get out. Others were vying to get in, so the box was a coveted space worth hanging onto. Finally, I asked the large group what we could do, and began to give them big clues. I asked how the children got in the box, and Kate immediately said 'on the chair', which had been sitting next to the box for the whole time. To my question, ' Then what do they need to do to get out?', she said, 'Have a drink?', which echoed their previous theory. After a few more minutes dancing, I asked again, and Tom said, 'Put the chair in the box'. So I did, and before I could get the camera out, all three scrambled out to claps and cheers from all.

By not giving them the answer, I respected their theory-making and made the solution theirs, not mine. Empowering children to believe in their thinking is one of the roles of early childhood education. As the Italian philosopher Malaguzzi (1996b) noted, 'Children learn by interacting with their environment, actively transforming their relations with the world of adults, with things, events and—in original ways—with their peers…'(p.22). Rather than continually supplying them with answers, we want to encourage children to continue thinking and to seek possible solutions to difficulties they encounter. Seeing young children as 'significant thinkers' (H. Conroy, 21 May 2004, personal communication) provokes us to rethink the ways in which we, as adults, spend our time with them.

Re-playing play

As early childhood specialists, we 'know' that *play* is the key to our thinking about children's experience in group settings (Fleet & Robertson, 2002; Fromberg, 2002; Johnson, Christie & Yawkey, 1999; Manning-Marton & Thorp, 2003). 'Play' has always included valuable components of exploration and problem-solving, initiative-taking and collaboration. From this frame of reference, it is common to offer boxes for play. We have not, however, been good about conveying to the wider community our understandings of the skills and meanings that children develop through such play.

Meanwhile, as the community has become more concerned about what children are learning in early childhood programs, it has become more important to make explicit the richness of learning inherent in everyday interactions. It is, however, important that the community demand for transparency in learning outcomes should not be interpreted by staff as requiring formal instructional programs in centres. A new focus might usefully be placed on sharing our understandings of 'learning through play' in a more theoretical and explicit way.

Seeing social interaction as a site for peace-making, given the current world context, also seems to us to be a curriculum imperative. With young children, the notion of 'peace-making' may be considered in terms of growing abilities to solve problems, to see the points of view of others, to negotiate, to pause before reacting, to think about which words are used in a confronting situation. From a social justice perspective, the view of a child working effectively in a group, of children learning ways of being together, is part of a solutions-oriented world. These approaches have the potential to empower those who may not usually have a voice. Solving the problem of the box is an example of a site for peace-making, as it embodies the children as constructors of solutions which benefit the group. Thinking about 'play' in these terms extends our sense of professional behaviour as well as our understanding of the richness of children's daily interactions.

THINK and CHAT

Consider a few recent interactions between children during the day's play. Talk with others who were there about the opportunities for problem-solving or negotiation or collaboration which were taken or missed by the children.

After watching and thinking about the exchanges, what did the adults say or do, or what might the adults have said or done to encourage the children to work together to solve the problem(s) they were encountering?

Basic staff competencies associated with meeting contextual requirements (including regulations associated with each state or service type), adhering to timetables, and pursuing a program designed to promote children's optimal growth and development are still fundamental expectations for staff. However, these requirements are at a minimalist level of responsibility and do not encompass the richness of possibility.

The complexities of our local and global communities require thoughtfulness and insight from early childhood professionals, rather than prescribed approaches. We need to look at children and their lives in centres through different lenses from those in the past. We need to look beyond pre-planned programs and become open to the possibilities inherent in reinterpreting the interactions that unfold around us.

We have shown already how staff thoughtfulness and child persistence transformed the arrival of a box into a rich experience in cooperative problem-solving and exploration. Another story may help tease out further the potential of this way of working.

The circle-makers: The stalwarts, the floaters and the organisers

Traditionally we use standing circles in games and in play, but do we really see them as opportunities to engage children's thinking?

The toddlers had been able to make a standing ring, or circle, all year. The process seemed to fascinate them; they held hands and arranged each other within the circle, giggling, swinging arms and smiling at each other across the space in the middle. This passion for circles intrigued me. How could these children, at such a young age, manage to make a circle? In fact, these children could 'travel' (walk as a circle), and then change direction and travel the other way. We have conjectured many reasons: the 'group-ness' of it, the primal shape of circles, the relationship of each other within a structure, or possibly an energy which flows from child to child through their hands.

I was curious to see if their passion and desire could overcome what would seem to be impossible if seen through a developmental lens (Dahlberg, 1999). Until now, an adult had always participated in making the circle. The adult sorted out the odds and ends—once the children had partially assembled the circle—and mediated disputes about who would hold whose hand. I asked the children if they could make a circle on their own without our help.

From their starting positions, the children quite easily joined hands, in much the same order as they had been sitting. I took photos while they made the circle and my role as photographer seemed to help the children realise that I was busy and could not help them. Very young children such as Preemet, Jordan and Rachel acceded to the 'power' of the group. They just stood, their hands held by more experienced circle-makers. Ryan, excited by the emerging shape, galloped around the edge for a while, initially missing out on finding a gap and joining hands. However, he was drawn to one edge of the emerging circle and held Rachel's hand. Movement now ceased; they seemed satisfied with the shape.

Photos courtesy of Mia-Mia Institute of Early Childhood

Photos courtesy of Mia-Mia Institute of Early Childhood

Then Simon shot through the younger children's complacency by announcing, 'It's only a half circle!' Cory, assessing the situation, seemed to realise that Ryan's position presented the problem. He let go of Melissa's hand, took Ryan's arm and pulled him over to Lara, attempting to bridge the gap. Unfortunately, Ryan then let go of Rachel's hand, thereby making another gap.

At this point, Preemet, on her sixth day in the centre, let go both hands and stood off-centre, her hands occupied by her bag. Cory promptly left his place once more and remonstrated with Preemet: 'Hold hands. No bag! You hold hands.'

Preemet, with little English, considered this for a moment. Cory returned to Ryan, held his hand firmly and dragged the circle around towards Preemet. Mel and Lachlan quickly held hands, bridging the gap left by Cory. Then, the masterstroke (just as I ran out of film): Cory reached down and held the strap of Preemet's bag. She took one look, turned sideways, and held Rachel's hand with her left. The circle was complete.

It seems that the skills each child brought to the group were utilised by the group. Thus the circle is not only a group endeavour, but represents group expertise.

This enterprise is possible, as Malaguzzi (1996b) comments, because

> 'Interactions between children in small groups (which is just one of the possible group sizes) enables negotiations and communicative exchanges that are more frequent, more stimulating, easier, and in any case different from and no less important than interactions between adults and children. It follows that the knowledge children acquire by themselves or with peers (in the context of interactive experiences designed with the help of adults) has an important role in the organisation of the ideas and behaviour on which, as teachers, our educational strategies and processes are based' (p.22).

When we have shared these stories with others, there is often the anguished response, 'Yes, but I don't *see* things like that',

or 'But how do you *know* there's a theory there?' It is important to understand that the insights about the circle-makers were not apparent at the time. The recognition that the stalwarts who held hands were just as critical to the circle building as the organisers, came later. Just as we all know 'movers and shakers' who make things happen in our families and communities, we also know that, for the family or community to function, we need people who are the social glue, who 'stand there and hold hands', who agree to take the roles asked of them and participate in the process as it unfolds. These understandings from our daily experience are part of our repertoire of ideas that help us to build theories about the interactions we see with children daily. We must encourage ourselves to be analytical and reflective, to use common sense as well as considering outrageous possibilities, to read widely and think deeply, to talk with each other about our observations and wonder about theories.

THINK and CHAT

Talk with others in your centre. Brainstorm recent events like a 'Box' or 'Circle' story that has unfolded with your children. What theories might the children have been trying out as they participated in these experiences?

What possibilities are there for finding out more about how the children are learning to be members of their group by watching them from within a new perspective?

Building thinking together

Having considered these two stories, it may be a useful moment to revisit the idea of the social construction of knowledge. Much has been written about this philosophical and pedagogical perspective. For example, in their book *Beyond quality in early childhood education and care* (1999), Dahlberg, Moss and Pence note that:

> 'Social construction is a social process, and in no way existent apart from our own involvement in the world—the world is always *our* world, understood or constructed by ourselves, not in isolation but as part of a community of human agents, and through our active interaction and participation with other people in that community' (p.23).

Similarly, writing in *Making learning visible* (2001)—a rich provocation from Reggio Emilia—Kretchevsky and Mardell note that:

> 'The social nature of development reaches into all aspects of human experience. From birth most of us are guided into ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving by family, peers, and others. Even when ostensibly working alone, individuals rely on socially created tools and artefacts. In this way, all cognitive activity is bound to a social context' (p.286).

Why do these ideas matter? If we have been taught that planning for the individual is the essence of professional responsibility for the early childhood educator, it may seem retrograde to think again about a group of children. On the other hand, if we have been taught to manage the activities and time schedules of 'the group', it may sit uncomfortably to try to think about the lived experience of each child moving within that larger group.

In helping us understand young children who are not yet able to make themselves understood by tradition-bound adults, it may be helpful to consider the insights gained by our colleagues in Reggio Emilia (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998). The founding educational leader in this Italian community, Loris Malaguzzi, helps us think through the importance of visualising very young children as individuals living within the context of small groups, of learning communities. Each opportunity offered to us to think more about ways to deal with these tensions can assist us to work more thoughtfully and effectively in our environments.

Malaguzzi (1996a) summarised the philosophies of the educators in Reggio Emilia in this way:

> '…we hold to an idea that children are born speaking, and speaking to someone. The fact that the spoken word (words made of sounds that we can identify and interpret) is lacking at birth and does not arrive for many months to come, does not hinder children's vital, insuppressible, and eager search to build friendships by

seeking, sending, and accumulating messages and conversations. The words that will eventually be spoken are not the result of a sudden event, born of nothing, but come from the submerged and silent laboratory of attempts and experiments in communication that children set up straight from birth' (p.17).

While we have been unpacking these ideas with stories about very young children, the theories being explored are evident in the daily experiences of older children. The following story of two four-year-old boys illustrates how children creating culture can be easily overlooked if adults are focusing on craft or activity-based curriculum.

The lift: Children's living history

Early one morning at the beginning of play outside, two boys began the lift game. This game has been played in these small spaces between the lockers since the Mia-Mia early childhood centre was opened almost 10 years ago. Two and sometimes three children squeeze into this space and turn around; one pushes a 'button', they stand still, pause and then move out of the space to go and play. Obviously, the game has been passed on over the years. This game may also reflect the Mia-Mia children's enthusiasm for the lift across from our building which their families may choose to use when leaving.

Photo courtesy of Mia-Mia Institute of Early Childhood

It is always interesting to see children make something out of nothing, but it is even more interesting to see a game perpetuated over nine years. The inventor's name is lost in time. It's a game that has no props, and relies on space and imagination only. A casual observer might see only two boys standing between the lockers. Because the worlds children inhabit are not always transparent to adults, we can overlook the rich construction of meaning children create within a social framework. Sometimes the lift becomes a rocket … but again, it makes no noise and the players just step out after the trip. The culture of the game is so simple, it can be passed on without words; the actions speak for themselves.

I (Janet) find it to be one of those games which children tend to keep 'hidden' from adults; it was through observation and questions that we elicited the true nature of this apparent standing between the lockers. It's also a game which enables groups of children to put a pause in a wilder running game, and perhaps slow things down if they are getting a little hectic.

Learning through everyday events

Part of the challenging context we work in is the heritage of a developmental framework which implies, for example, that we needn't worry much about interaction within groups in the birth-three rooms, because, at best, we will see parallel play until language and logical thought have developed to the point of enabling the four-year-olds to work together constructively. Or we will see four-year-olds beginning to collaborate.

Our friends from Italy have, however, challenged this theoretical position by asking us to stand back from the earlier research and look more closely at what happens in every waking hour in a large family or a day care centre. When we adopt this stance of watchful understanding, we then see that, from the earliest days of focus and movement, the infant is exploring his or her position in the world and in relationship to self, other people and objects. This active curiosity becomes interactive far earlier than we have been expected to believe.

Malaguzzi (1996a) commented on everyday events as follows:

> 'By re-examining one by one the events in the adventure[s] of these children…, we may have the chance to understand better how action, communication, and social interaction are the indisputable sources of thought refinement, cognitive development, cooperative learning, and also the source of the powerful tool which is language, even before it becomes verbal. . . And seeing the way the world is going, we greatly need to develop a more continuous and higher quality dialogue with children, and offer them broader opportunities in which to seek each other, to talk together, to make friends' (p.19).

As the way of working which is known as 'the Project of Reggio Emilia' emerged from an area devastated by the Second World War, these words have powerful import for us in today's bellicose environment.

THINK and CHAT

Look around your workplace. What elements characterise it as a learning community? Is it a learning community for adults? What might need to be re-thought in order to help the adults see themselves as part of such a community?

What might need to change in order for the youngest children to be seen as part of a learning community?

Looking back on the stories, it is possible to see what Malaguzzi was referring to when he asked us to draw on an 'interactive and socio-constructivist concept of child development…[in which] development is seen not as an individual enterprise but as a process of social construction' (1996b, p.21). He went on to explain that in order for adults to appreciate and interpret the value of children's cooperative work, there is a need to recognise and respond to three conditions. These are that:

1) adults 'must be convinced that children are born with the tools and the will to do and think actively' and that children develop their communicating and other skills through interaction with the objects, ideas and people around them;

2) commitment to this belief must be demonstrated to children; and consequently

3) adults 'must behave consistently, and be competent in the art of inclusion, listening, support' and be 'especially competent in making loans of conscience and knowledge, as Vygotsky's wisdom tells us' (1996b, p.21).

The stories illustrate these points. For example, with reference to the first point, *The box* illuminates the notion that children actively seek and demonstrate the ability to communicate in order to achieve a goal with others. The *commitment* in the second point is clear in *The circle* story as the children striving to create the circle were spurred on by Janet's trust that they could do it, while the story of *The lift* encompasses all three of these conditions.

THINK and CHAT

Consider Malaguzzi's conditions for adults interpreting and valuing children's cooperative work. What might it mean for adults or knowledgeable others to 'make a loan of conscience' or 'make a loan of knowledge'? Think of an instance where this might have occurred. These ideas reflect a way of working that is different from a transmission curriculum (teaching specific information) or a laissez-faire curriculum (standing back and letting it all unfold naturally).

How might these approaches be reflected in the way you or your team is currently working or would like to be working?

These ideas may be challenging, particularly for those who have been led to believe that the primary tasks in nursery and toddler rooms relate to the physical wellbeing of children, with a focus on ensuring that the young ones have clean, safe places to amuse themselves. Similarly, those in preschool rooms who perceive their task as one of skill development may focus on providing a more formal curriculum structure. These beliefs about the roles of adults in the care of young children are, of course, accurate up to a point. They are, however, narrow and limiting if reconsidered through this richer, more empowered lens of possibilities.

The curriculum framework for prior to school services in New South Wales proposed a definition of curriculum in which

> 'The curriculum is everything professionals do to support children's learning and wellbeing, the intentional provisions and offerings they make in order to create possibilities and opportunities for children's engagement.
>
> The conversion by children of these opportunities and possibilities into actual experiences, and the meanings they make with them, assume forms that are sometimes expected and predictable and often unexpected and unimagined. What children do with the provisions is influenced by their abilities, what they observe others doing, the encouragement and support they receive from others, and what interests them at the time' (p.111).

Considering everyday events and group interactions as core components of curriculum foregrounds what we call *the overlooked curriculum*. The richness inherent in *The box, The lift* and *The circle* experiences for children are not isolated possibilities, or even unusual opportunities. In replaying these experiences, the adults within the program are able to examine and propose theories about learning and offer them to the wider community.

Conclusion

These stories and ideas provide opportunities for discussion and reflection. They also offer springboards for ways of working which build more on the richness of children's experiences rather than focusing on needs, which recognise staff insight as well as pragmatism, and which promote the possibility of story-sharing with families. As more people think about the co-construction of knowledge, and build on the rich possibilities of complex everyday social contexts for enhancing children's experiences, we will gain an empowering professional dynamic. Children and their families will benefit from this richer conception of possibilities in group environments.

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Overlooked curriculum: Seeing everyday possibilities

Overlooked curriculum: Seeing everyday possibilities challenges early childhood educators and others caring for young children to reflect upon everyday interactions between children as a foundation for problem-solving, learning and developing relationships. Authors Alma Fleet and Janet Robertson, who share an interest in applying the concepts of Reggio Emilia in the Australian context, draw upon their in-depth knowledge to encourage discussion about the learning and context surrounding what is happening in shared group experiences. This can be used as a springboard for enhancing and enriching group interactions, giving a way of working with young children that has a greater focus on the possibilities and value of 'learning through play'.

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