The Big Atelier at Pablo Neruda
February 2006
Atelierista - Mara Davoli

I rush up the stairs, barely glancing at what is happening on the other floors; desperate to get back to the place I first encountered and began to understand a little more the work of the atelierista’s of the Reggio Emilia Pre-Schools in Northern Italy...

On my first visit to Neruda in October 2003, I found a place that was beautiful. The space was not just a space for children and their research but a place of research of the atelierista, Mara Davoli. I found more in common standing in this space, in Reggio, so far from home than any other ‘creative’ spaces I had encountered in the nurseries and schools I had worked at in the West Midlands. I felt deeply saddened, that this was not what our children were experiencing back at home and I felt it my mission to do something about it, somehow. It was an extremely powerful experience that made me reconsider my role back in the UK. At that point, I made the important decision to concentrate my work only in Early Years settings and to stop immediately all residencies and arts projects that did not fit into my own growing set of principles and values. Values of participation, of listening, of reflecting with others, and of valuing children as citizens of now and not just of the future. I felt that my work was not just, about how it fits into the West Midlands but that I was part of a connected, global network. I did not feel so alone and isolated. I had listened in the speeches of how Loris Malaguzzi had said..."You can change it, by taking charge of.” I could take charge of what I was doing in schools instead of following their programs and curriculum’s, I did not have to fit in, but instead break out and change the boundaries. It was a financial and ideological risk, but a risk I now had to take. To make visible my learning, research, as well as that of the children I worked with I began to document in earnest. It was not easy at first, extremely time consuming and often never used by anyone but me. Then I realised I had to be pro-active to find ways to reflect with the educators using documentation as a tool for understanding, interpreting and planning. Documentation was no longer an ‘add-on’ but an essential tool in my artist kitbag.

In May 2005, I returned to Reggio, this time to focus on the interactions of the educators and atelierista’s with the children. I was once again reminded by the beauty and order of all the schools I visited and again disturbed by the continuing disorganisation and chaos as I saw it in the
schools I was now working at. I was passionate about the environment and how we offered materials for exploration and expression to the children and was finding it increasingly affecting the way I worked with children, if the environment was not carefully considered, the interactions within it were also quite random and chaotic at times. New relationships with new schools I was working at meant that my suggestions of the importance of the environment, including the presentation of materials was not seen important as documenting the learning or the unfolding chaos as I saw it. I simply wanted to make sure the felt tips actually worked, that the pencils were sharpened to ensure that children could make marks, to get the clay out of the cupboard instead of doing ‘pretend’ clay work with easy to clear up play dough. These suggestions often were ignored or were met with, well only if we had time to do these all things…it was if I was speaking a different language. I feared that the documentation was becoming the new end product and that fancy documentation was hiding poor content and experience.

What I saw and realised at this second visit, was that I had been busy setting up creative environments without really involving the educators, I was doing to them instead of doing with them. I was assuming that we spoke the same language and I realised that I needed to share my thinking, experience and training as a visual artist with them whilst listening to their language of education and pedagogy. Watching the attentive methods and exploration of observational drawing skills, the atelierista at Robinson Pre-School was criticised by UK teachers for interfering in the process of observational drawing. I realised that this was not necessarily a creative experience but an experience of developing and understanding a creative skill, of exploring the process of how to draw and how to see. I understood this because my training as an artist was based on the development of skills and processes in order to realise a creative product. I was speaking in a different language after all and my next mission on my return to the West Midlands was to engage in a stronger, more reflective dialogue with better interactions with both children and educators sharing our thinking together and making this dialogue visible in our documentation.

So here I am, racing up the stairs of Neruda in February 2006...

I find Mara Davoli, at work with a group of four children. They are painting with shades of blue, green, and white. The paint of course is in
clear jars, with no lids. Children have square pieces of paper and are arranging the colours on the paper. It appears as if they are to cover the whole piece of paper with all the colours in the jars. I expect that the children have mixed all the colours themselves and that this is far from a creative activity exploring colour mixing but part of a construction of a research project about children and colour. On the table are reference materials, previous documentation, and research. As Mara talks to the children, in Italian, of course, she looks into their eyes as she talks; she listens not just with her ears but also with her whole body. As she documents and takes pictures she moves with grace and purpose, not intrusive with her photography, not ignoring the children in order to write everything down. The documentation process dancing delicately, ebbing to and fro with her delicate, meaningful interactions with the children.

I ask her about the origins of the project and her interactions with the children. She tells me how in researching the strategies of painting with children, the idea emerged of powerful colours. White and black are powerful colours, according to the children because they dominate the others. In exploring the powerful colours, they are exploring concepts of darkness and light too and Mara wanted to challenge the children, to see what happens when black encounters white. The idea is proposed to the other children at the morning assembly and an agreement is made to find out. The atelier is prepared with empty containers, spoons, and white and black paint and the children begin to prepare the colours. They employ strategies of mathematics to do this, measuring and counting the drops of colour needed to make a reaction and transformation of colour. It is not just an exploration of black + white = grey but an exploration of all the shades of grey in-between. It is an exploration of a skill, of colour mixing but a way understanding the transformational qualities of colour, it is science and research to help them explore the process of painting. Mara explains, colour like sound is an abstract concept, but they are concepts that children use and manipulate as main actors, protagonists and as subjects in their exploration of their languages. Different languages, like languages of music and sound connect with languages of graphics and colours, the connections enriching and pollinating the other languages, deepening and fertilising the experiences.

Children now consider other encounters of colours and begin to form hypothesis on the relationship of colours, of which colours might be friends with other colours, of considering where colour comes from. For Mara, this exploration and elaboration of a process “helps the children to
see, to experience and hypothesise, to discover and enjoy but also to become more conscious of a process, to pay attention and notice the process of transformation, variation and composition of colour.

Children now, begin to explore the concept of composition. To evaluate, and ask why is to become more conscious of what a composition needs in order to be a composition. Mara’s research with children has revealed that children consider variety, order/categorising, and organisation of space, important elements of a composition.

An important question emerges from a fellow artist working in the US “but why do you have to explain your art, Jackson Pollock didn’t feel the need, he felt that art should not have to explain itself”.

In contemplating this thought, Mara suggested that in a school (rather than a gallery) we have to experiment with both. Free exploration and improvisation (without reflection and evaluation) has to be explored alongside a more structured exploration and understanding of processes and ideas (with reflection and evaluation) because if we only offer improvisation and deduct the didactic processes, then the theory of the process with the artists work, is lost. Sometimes we need to stop the free improvisation of children in order for them and us to understand the processes, processes of technical skills, and processes of emotion and feeling as well as processes of evolving ideas and knowledge. This stopping of the improvisation can often lead to greater sense of freedom, to understand what you are trying to say and do, it allows you to see the strategies you are using now, and reduces the fear of doing new things because you can see the possible processes involved. Our job is to connect the experience of theory and practice through reflection, to make visible the processes without closing the door to children’s imagination and fantasy. This is a greater freedom we can give to children.

In considering freedom, we also need to consider the freedom of saying what we think rather than a politically correct, non-confrontational contaminated sense of freedom. Mara explained that if we do not say, what we feel and think it could lead to a sense of indifference. Indifference shows little respect to children, to staff, to other educators. If we cannot be bothered and are not open to listen and to speak to each other, then this indifference will prevent us from any meaningful dialogue and reflection. I fear that the programs and
structured curriculum’s we fear will fill the empty spaces that indifference creates very quickly indeed. The cultivation of freedom is not easy. The cultivation of indifference is.

In cultivating children’s learning experiences to let them choose everything they want, whenever they want in the name of freedom and free flow we could, if we are not attentive to the processes be betraying the children we work alongside. Freedom on its own can be isolating and chaotic, freedom, when forming a relationship with reflection and making visible the processes gives all its participants an incredible sense of freedom, a freedom to learn.

So now, sitting at my desk at home, writing this, I consider what my next mission is and I realise that my other missions have only really just begun. Instead of coming this time to Reggio to understand more the role of the atelierista, I have discovered instead more about myself. The Reggio experience adds weight to my arguments and theories back in the West Midlands but it has really taught and reminded me that no matter how much experience we have as artists, teachers and educators that we must ensure that reflective cycles inform every single aspect of our work with children, and indeed in our lives. I will continue to fight for the right for children to experience beauty and aesthetics in their learning environments. I will continue to work alongside teachers investigating meaningful interactions and interventions with children. I will continue to explore ideas of provocation and encounters. I will share my language as an artist with others I work with, listening and connecting it with their different languages. Researching and co-constructing knowledge alongside of children is my work, and I am just striving to get better at this. Just the getting better bit, is a mission! I acknowledge that this will be an incredible journey with many different stopping of points and changes of direction. The dialogues with atelieristi, teachers, and pedagogisti of Reggio Emilia feed my professional needs and feed the process of reflection, of understanding why we do, what we do. The time to talk in depth with other colleagues and friends on the study tour helps to shape my reflections into positive action and thought back in the UK. The wonderful cheese, cakes, pastries, wine, pasta, and Italian air all help with this process of reflection and self-evaluation. We can all strive to be better and in the word of Loris Malaguzzi remind ourselves; “you can change it, by taking charge of.”

Debi Keyte-Hartland - February 2006